

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

Dr. Barry M. Foster

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Jesus and Mothers: A Mother's Day Miscellany

Mark 3:7-15, 20-21, 31-35 (NIV)

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. 8 When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. 9 Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. 10 For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. 11 Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12 But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.

13 Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. 14 He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach 15 and to have authority to drive out demons.

20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. 21 When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Luke 11:14-28 (NIV)

4 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. 15 But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons," 16 while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. 17 But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. 18 And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. 19 And if I cast

out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; 22 but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. 23 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

24 “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ 25 And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. 26 Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

27 As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” 28 But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

John 19:23-27 (NIV)

23 When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

24 “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.”

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said,

*“They divided my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.”*

So this is what the soldiers did.

25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” 27 and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Mother’s Day is always a special day for me. By the grace of God, I have not only enjoyed life with my favorite wife, for whom I am eternally grateful, but I have been privileged to have had the tremendous blessing, the undeserved gift of a great mom.

[Slide 2]

My mother's circumstances weren't ideal. She was pregnant when she graduated from high school, in an age when that was regarded as shameful. My grandfather, her stepfather, drove her from eastern Washington to northern California to the army base where my father was stationed so that they could get married; then drove her back home so that I could be born a few months later.

That marriage only lasted a couple of years, long enough for my sister to come along. Then Mom carried the label of "divorced," again, in an era where that label marked her as a failure. But she was determined to make the very best of the very little that we had. So she came to KC with my favorite aunt to attend a school that prepared them for a job with the airlines. She got hired by United Air Lines and moved my sister and me from the forests of eastern Washington to the desert—to Las Vegas. She met my stepfather, married, had two more babies. Then we moved to Colorado where she had one more baby and where I grew up.

We never had much money; things were always tight, and we went without a lot of the niceties that today would be taken for granted in most American homes. But Mom never let us think that we were poor. She sacrificed and used every bit of her considerable willpower and ingenuity to make life better for us. She modeled generosity, kindness, fairness, respect for others (and their property), doing things to the best of your ability, never looking down on anyone. We saw on a daily basis her example of determination and persistence, never giving up, never quitting, always looking for a way to solve the problem, to find a creative way to make life better for those around us.

[Slide 3]

My mother was a teacher long before she got hired as a teacher. She was always teaching; every day, in every situation she would find something that we needed to learn. In my mom's mind, the world was a school, life was for learning, and she was determined to help us—and everyone else—learn its lessons.

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Naturally, Mom placed a high value on education. From the time I was in first grade, she would talk to me about the importance of school. She never said to me, "*If you go to college . . .*"; it was always, "*When you go to college . . .*" So it was no surprise when at the age of 33, this mother of five school-aged children (kindergarten through high school), began her own college career, working part-time at a local mortuary, then at the donut shop in the early mornings, all while continuing to run the household and care for us. (She didn't sleep much.) And it was also not a surprise when she graduated four years later, I believe with honors,

and then began her career as a public high school teacher in social studies, government, and US history. (Or when she went back to school to earn her master's degree.) When she retired twenty years later, the list of accolades from colleagues, administrators, and former students was remarkable—but, again, not surprising to me or my sisters or anyone, really, who knew her.

She was, quite simply, with the possible exception of my wife, the greatest woman I have ever known. And there are days like today when I miss her most, when I would love to be able to hear her voice again.

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But my mom was not perfect. Now, it is certainly not my place or my desire (especially on Mother's Day!) to point out her flaws to you. I recall something in what Jesus said about the whole “speck-in-your-eye-plank-in-mine” thing that would make that an unwise move.

What I do want to share is this observation. My mother died far too young; she was full of life until mesothelioma stole it in 2007. But in her latter years, she struggled with what I regard as a false sense of guilt. In particular, she felt guilty for not living up to what she had been taught was the ideal mark of a truly Christian woman and wife. Despite all that she had done to help us kids; all that she had done to make our home liveable, to help our family survive; all that she had done to change the lives of students for twenty years, not to mention all that she had done professionally and personally to make an enormous difference in her community, in her church, in the lives of countless people—she still battled with a nagging sense of failure, the feeling that she had let God down.

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I've told you about my mother, not because I want you to feel bad because you didn't have the best mother. (Since, obviously, we had the best mother. Well, and my kids—they had the best mother.) No, I honestly hope that you feel that your mother was the best. Every kid deserves to have the best mother. And every husband's job is to help his wife become the best mother (if they have children) and to make sure his children understand that he thinks they have the best mother.

And if your mother wasn't all that great, I hope that you have been able to find some good in who she is or was and to thank God for her and for how she helped you become who you are today. Even if that is in spite of who she is and what she did or didn't do. If nothing else, she brought you into this world where you have a chance to know God and his goodness and his love.

[Slide 7]

No, I've told you about my mother because I think that her struggle is far more common than we realize. Our culture—maybe every culture?—is completely confused when it comes to women and mothers. We live in a world of conflicting images of what it means to be a woman or a mom. One moment we are idolizing mothers and motherhood, putting them on a pedestal as if they were something just below being divine. The next moment we're denigrating motherhood as something to be escaped. We set women up for failure—presenting expectations that are impossible to fulfill as if they were normal and easily reached; then we condemn and shame them when they don't live up to the artificial images we've said ought to be their goals.

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Just look at the confusing mix of pictures out there today for what we think women in general, and moms in particular, ought to look like.

There's the "Super-mom": her house is perfectly decorated, always clean; her kids excel at school, music, athletics; she's the president of the PTA, the chauffeur and sponsor for the soccer team, in charge of the neighborhood clean-up; she's always well-groomed and looks like a supermodel.

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On the other hand, we've got the trashy mom. She's an alcoholic or drug addict, maybe recovering, who neglects her kids or teaches them horrible ways to live, but she's funny and the life of the party. She's "real" (in the imaginations of the scriptwriters)—even though her internal pain is only partially hidden under her hardened outer shell.

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There's the career woman who excels in a man's world, who fights her way to the top of the corporate ladder, the successful CEO and entrepreneur who has broken free from the "shackles" of being a wife and mother. She doesn't cook, but she has a cook. Or she is gourmet chef in addition to her other accomplishments.

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There's the caricature of the conservative Christian mom: She's a stay-at-home mom who has never worked outside her home, where she home-schools her seven children, makes her own clothes, grows their food, and dotes on her husband, who rules as the benevolent overlord of the family.

[Slide 12]

And what do we make of the stepmom, who is trying to win the acceptance and approval of her husband's children? They see her as the enemy, the one who replaced their mom, the stranger who doesn't belong, the intruder who has

interrupted their lives and is trying to change everything. Or the foster mother, rescuing kids from horrific situations, offering a tiny bit of respite and maybe a step or three forward to kids who hate being there, or are resigned to their fate and just trying to survive without getting hurt again, or worse. At best they're appreciative but still wounded. And the foster mom feels overwhelmed, wondering what will help this child recover, and will she ever really feel connected to him or her in a way that both of them think is real and good?

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What about all of the other women? What about those who have never married, not by choice, but because no one asked? Or the ones who desperately wanted to have children, but for whatever combination of reasons it hasn't happened?

What about the single mothers? It's by far the hardest job in the world, raising a child by yourself. What about the grandmas who are raising their grandchildren because there's no one else there when mom and dad go to work, or the parents split up, or they buried their daughter or some other tragedy of human failure left them as the only ones who could care for these abandoned kids?

[Slide 14]

What about all the ordinary moms who are just trying to do their best and their best doesn't seem to be enough?

What exactly does a good mom look like? What is the picture that we're supposed to hold in front of our girls to let them know, "*This is what it looks like to be a woman; this is what it means to be a mom.*" I can tell you that our culture is not helping us at all. Our culture is confused and drowning in a sea of conflicting and irreconcilable notions that are so distorted that there are now loudly screaming voices insisting that we don't even know what it means to be female. (And before anyone objects—I am well aware of the irony that I am a male making that comment.)

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But let's return to this point about the ordinary women and ordinary moms. Here's what I wonder. How many women spend a significant percentage of their time and energy worrying about not being _____ enough? How many think:

- I'm not pretty enough . . . to compete with the air-brushed glam models, with the pornstars, with the ladies at the office or in the neighborhood who never had kids, didn't gain weight, still look young (or are young).
- I'm not smart enough . . . to earn a huge pay check.
- I'm not talented enough . . . to get anyone's attention.

- I'm not organized enough . . . to keep the house clean or keep track of all of the kids' activities.
- I'm not patient enough . . . to handle my rambunctious kids, or deal with my husband's mood swings.
- I'm not young enough . . . to matter anymore to anyone, to be more than just a burden for someone else to have to deal with.
- I'm not strong enough . . . to deal with the emotional weight of my failures, my kids' failures, my husband's indifference.
- I'm not holy enough . . . to really belong at church, much less to please God.

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Our culture's attempt at an answer to this problem of women not feeling "enough" has been to offer the equivalent of participation trophies. "*You're all awesome!!!*" But although that sounds nice, the puff of '*hooray for us!*' pseudo-cheers can't fill the ache inside; can't relieve the nagging sense of inadequacy and failing to meet the mark that continually eats away at a woman's sense of being important, being wanted, being loved, being well, being enough. So instead of looking to our culture's images of what it means to be a woman or a mother, let's look at how Jesus related to women—indeed, to his own mother—and see what we can find there to help us.

[Slide 17] *The priority of family*

Let's begin with two bits of historical background. In many ways, women in Jesus' day had a harder life, but a somewhat simpler life in terms of the roles they were expected to play and the opportunities available to them. But human sinfulness had made a mess of their culture just as it has done with ours.

First, in Jewish culture of the first century, family was a priority above almost all else. Family had the first claim on your allegiance, with the possible exception of allegiance to Yahweh—though the two were often confused. Your responsibilities to your family were binding for life, and everyone in the community would not only reinforce those responsibilities, but help to ensure that you fulfilled them.

[Slide 18] *The value of women*

Second, women in Jesus' day were valued primarily for their ability to bear children. It was the most important marker for status and worth that women could obtain. For a woman to have status, she must first be married, and then have children. To bear a son brought honor to her and to her husband and the family; to bear several sons multiplied the honor. If those sons became important men, then her honor increased even more. The highest honor of all would be to be the mother

of the Messiah. Nothing else comes close to this in the culture; mother to the Messiah was the crown jewel in a Jewish mother's dreams.

On the practical level, however, a woman's value was shown in how she excelled in pleasing her husband. Her essential role was to bring profit and honor to him, which required bearing children (the more the better, a matter that was complicated by the high rate of infant and child mortality, as well as the frequency of death in childbirth), mastery of domestic chores, and the avoidance of shame.

[Slide 19] *Mark 3—Jesus' family stages an intervention*

Our first passage today came from Mark's gospel. It tells of an incident early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee. The crowds have responded to Jesus' healing power and come to him in droves. There are so many with so many illnesses and needs that he is busy from morning until night day after day.

Jesus' family—his mother and his brothers, Joseph having passed away some years earlier—hears the news and decides this has gone on far enough. Whatever Jesus is trying to accomplish, things have clearly gotten out of control. He has lost his mind, they think. It was bad enough that he quit his job. But now, he is on this crazy preaching tour, with crowds from everywhere. He is doing too much. He is going to cross the religious leaders or arouse the suspicions of the Romans and get himself killed or locked up. He needs to come home and get back to normal life. They must stage an intervention and put an end to this nonsense before he brings additional shame to the family with his unorthodox behavior.

Jesus' family assumes that he will bow to conventional wisdom and follow the customs that dictate that he must yield to the family's insistence, and thus avoid shaming them further. They appeal to his sense of loyalty to the family: "*The family has come to see you; come and talk to us.*"

Jesus' response is stunning. In a very public setting, in a very public way, he denies what his family presumes he must acknowledge—their claim to have first priority in his allegiance. Don't forget that his mother is one of the bunch who has come to intervene. She and his brothers are insisting that he relate to her and to them as the culture dictates—that he honor his mother, as the Law requires, and so stop what he is doing to attend to their request.

But Jesus refuses. And he goes a step further—he counters their claim to his allegiance with a challenge. "*Who are my mother and brothers? . . . Here are my mother and my brothers!*" Jesus identifies with his followers, his disciples, instead of with his mother and his brothers. He is not denying that they are still his family. But he is denying that their relationship to him is primary. Jesus has elevated his disciples to a status of relationship that is above that of natural family.

His disciples represent the new Israel, the true Israel, who are God's people by virtue of their relationship to Jesus rather than their relationship to Abraham. As such, they are now his primary family, the family to whom he owes his primary allegiance. They now have both the highest privilege and his first loyalty. (And he will require that same allegiance of them—that they forsake father and mother and all family in order to follow him.)

Let's not miss the importance of this little detail in a relatively unfamiliar passage: Jesus has insisted that in his kingdom, cultural norms no longer define our values or allegiances or expectations, even the most powerful and important norms involving the most basic and significant relationships, that of family. He has redefined what it means to be his family—especially for his brothers and mother to understand. His mother and brothers do not take priority over his disciples, nor do they hold any authority or claim over him.

[Slide 20] *Luke 11—A woman praises Mary as the mother of the Messiah*

Our second passage today is also a bit obscure, and also confronts the cultural assumptions of his day to the shock of all who are there. In Luke 11, Jesus is ministering to a crowd. A significant feature of his ministry in this setting involved casting out demons—a display of God's power that amazed people and led many of them to conclude that he might be the Messiah (while others concluded that he was a sorcerer). While he is speaking to the crowd, a woman cries out with an exclamation of blessing. "*Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!*"

The woman's courage to speak out in public was fueled by her excitement at the prospect that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised one who would save Israel! Her exclamation is a way of praising Jesus' mother, and calling for God to bless his mother, to bring her good as a reward and a sign of God's favor. She is expressing the common cultural belief that the highest status available for women was to be a mother, especially the mother of the Messiah.

[Slide 21] *Jesus' shocking response*

But Jesus immediately corrects the woman; she is mistaken. His reply may not have been sharply uttered, as if she must be firmly rebuked. But even if his manner was gentle, what he said was shocking.

Jesus again insists that those who are listening to him, who are receiving his teaching and following him, are the ones whom God will bless, who will receive God's favor. They are the ones to whom God has given ultimate status, not his mother. Mary might have felt blessed to be Jesus' mother—I'm sure she did, and I'm sure that Jesus was happy that she felt that way. After all, Luke's gospel

recorded earlier the story of Jesus' conception, and the announcement of the angel Gabriel that Mary had been shown God's favor in being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. But Jesus insists that his earthly mother does not have a special status above any of his followers. Those who hear his words, who understand them, and live by them—they are the people who are blessed by God; God's favor rests upon them. His mother is among them: she is blessed, not because she is his mother, but because she is one of his followers. But she is not above them.

[Slide 22] *Jesus and women*

There's another important point to see in this passage. When Jesus was speaking to this crowd, the audience who heard him consisted of both men and women. When Jesus says that those who are blessed are those who hear his word—who recognize his teaching as the word of God—and who choose to follow him and live according to what he says, he is opening up an opportunity for women that was previously unavailable because of the limitations of Jewish culture in the first century.

Women were not allowed to learn the Law, to study the Torah. That was restricted to the men. Women were considered unworthy (because Eve had sinned) and untrustworthy (because Sarah lied to God about laughing); they were forbidden to learn what Scripture said. Whatever they needed to know, the men would tell them. Rabbi Eliezer (*ca.* 90 C.E.) said, "*If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery.*" So a leading rabbi in the first century tells us that teaching women the Law, letting them know the Scriptures, was the equivalent of teaching her to be a whore. That was the dominant and controlling view in Judaism in the first century.

[Slide 23] *A revolutionary step*

But Jesus completely destroys that cultural expectation. Instead of assuming that women are ignorant and unable to learn, he assumes that they are fully able to learn his teaching, and to understand it and to apply the word of God to their lives. That Jesus allowed women to be his disciples, to learn from him and to take the position of a follower was a radical step—it was nothing short of revolutionary. And it brought Jesus and his disciples a lot of antagonism from the Pharisees and the Jewish religious leaders.

What Jesus was offering to women was not only a novel opportunity, it was a completely different way to live. Instead of limiting women to finding affirmation and validation through *being a mother*, he gave women a way to find affirmation and validation *as a person*, someone who was created in the image of God, who was fully worthy to be called one of his followers; someone in whom

God would live; someone whose value and identity were based on her relationship to God through Christ, not on her relation to her husband or her children. (One of the reasons that church grew so rapidly during the first three centuries, and even throughout its history and globally today, is because Jesus gave women equal standing with men as his followers.)

[Slide 24] *John 19: Jesus and his mother*

Now I hope that no one is misunderstanding what I'm saying today or what Jesus meant by what he said to his disciples. Because Jesus wasn't denigrating mothers or saying that mothers aren't important or anything like that. He wasn't denying that Mary, his mother, had a unique place in the history of the universe, to be the mother of the Son of God. Jesus loved his mother—not only as one of his followers, but as his mother. He showed that clearly in our final passage, which comes from John's gospel—it is one of the final scenes of the crucifixion, shortly before Jesus breathes his last.

Mary was one of the few who remained with Jesus through the whole of his ordeal on the cross. We don't know if she was hoping till the very end for a miracle, if she was desperately praying for God to do something, or if she was simply overcome with grief. All we know is that she was there. And in his final moments, Jesus saw his mother, saw her pain, and he had compassion on her.

John was also there. In his dying agony, Jesus gives one final instruction to the both of them. With every breath came another shock of pain, but he managed with his gasping words, to let them know that he was assigning John to take care of his mother as if she were his own. And Mary was to regard John as her son, to care for him as she had for Jesus, and to depend on him as she had depended on Jesus. In his final moments, Jesus made sure that his mother would be taken care of after he died.

[Slide 25]

I hope you realize that the importance and value of mothers is beyond words; that the role of mothers in developing healthy children and impacting the world for good is beyond dispute; that good mothers are among the highest and best gifts in all the world. I hope you think of your mother as one of those good mothers. And if you happen to be a mother, I hope you think of yourself in the same way. But whether you are a mother or not, I want you to understand something that is exceedingly important: *Being a mother is not a better version of being a woman.* (That's also true for grandmothers!)

And the second is like unto it: *Being a woman is neither a better nor a lesser version of being a person.*

What matters is not whether you have given birth to children or have raised children that you have adopted or fostered or taken in off the streets. Of course it is a priceless gift to be a mother, a gift that you should treasure and for which we are all grateful. But what matters for eternity is not whether you have been married or not, whether you have had children or not, whether you have been divorced or widowed or not—what matters is that you are loved by God. You are wanted by him, valued by him for who you are as a person. You are invited to live as his follower, to listen to Jesus’ teaching, and to live according to what he said. If you have children, then you have (or have had) one of the most influential positions in all of the universe. If you are not married or have not had children, if your children are gone and you are all alone—your value hasn’t changed a bit. And the blessing of God, the favor of God can rest upon you—that sense of being important, of being complete, of being *someone*—that sense of knowing who and what you are is available to you—because Jesus blessed everyone who listens to his word, who lives by it. No matter who you are or what your status is according to the culture. His kingdom is different. Men and women together, singles and married, young and old, divorcees, widows/widowers, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, adults and children—we are all eligible to obtain the very highest status available to created beings in the universe: *the beloved of God*.

[Slide 26]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]