

"A Look at Mary"

Much can be said about mothers and how they view their children. I recently read, "Even the mothers of apes think their children are beautiful." Mothers are one of God's greatest gifts; without them, where would we be? Well, we wouldn't be alive, that's for sure.

We all can tell stories of how much our mother or a mother figure cared/cares for us. Episodes of nurture, compassion and love have molded us into who we are today. If playing the game of Jeopardy, and Alex Trebek says, "And the answer is... The most famous mother in the Bible, maybe in all of human history." The correct response would be, "Who is Mary, the mother of Jesus?" Today, I want us to examine Jesus' mother through the pen of John, the Gospel writer.

After John recorded the calling of Jesus' disciples, the next event he listed was the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples found themselves at the feast; his mother was also present at the wedding. Mary came to Jesus with a problem; they had run out of wine. She shared the dilemma with Jesus in hopes that he would do something, maybe even a miracle.

Jesus was virtually unknown at this time. He had just called his disciples, but had not performed any miracles, yet his mother knew him. Indeed his mother knew him better than his newly selected disciples, and she knew that he could help. The wedding party was probably wondering what they were going to do; how could they continue the celebration? Yet, Mary knew.

Mothers, you should know your children. There are aspects of your children's personalities that only parents can pick up, if they know their children. To understand your children, you have to spend time with them. You have to talk to them, that's to them, not at them, or around them. Mothers need to engage their children in conversation and observe their behavior daily. There's a difference in knowing about your children and knowing your children. Myriads of people know about Jesus, but few in comparison truly know him.

Mary knew Jesus pretty well. Scholars do not know what happened to Mary's husband Joseph or when. We find the last recorded mention of Joseph when Jesus was twelve-years-old. Tradition holds that Joseph died before Jesus was an adult, which indicates a period of time when Mary was a single parent.

In their society, Jewish women without husbands had no power or status. Their identities relied on their mates, so Mary probably had it really tough trying to raise a family without a man. She may have depended heavily upon her eldest son, Jesus.

Mary had had an immaculate conception. She had a vision of an angel that announced her "favor among women" in being chosen to become the mother of the Son of God. As a baby, she nursed Jesus, changed his diapers, and disciplined him, all the time knowing that he was the Son of God. She knew who he truly was. Mary's parenting of Jesus came through the filter of her knowledge of his uniqueness. What a tremendous responsibility it must have been to parent a child whose understanding of personal identity would continue to evolve, like the dawning of the morning sun. And now, Jesus was 30 years old, the age that manhood was conferred upon a Jewish male. Even though Jesus was now recognized as a man, his Mama knew him better than anyone at the wedding. So she presented the dilemma to Jesus.

Mary believed in her son; she had faith that he could make a difference. She knew his abilities, and her confidence led her to tell the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. So Jesus requested that the servants fill up six large jugs with water, and then take some to the master of the banquet. The result was that the water was turned into wine. Verse 11 says that this was Jesus' first public miracle, and thus the disciples put their faith in him. Once they witnessed what he could do, the disciples

believed in Jesus; actions speak louder than words. But from the story, we can infer that Mary had already believed in him.

Our society would be a different one if all mothers believed in their children. The hard and cold fact is that probably more mothers than fathers believe in their children, given the statistics of non-payment of child support.

Worlds can be changed when individuals know that someone believes in them. A child's self-esteem skyrockets when he/she knows that the parents have confidence in them. Parents should serve as the molder of dreams; we are the chief influences on our children's development. Everyone is a product; I am a product of Smitty and Rea Smith, which brings positives and negatives. My children are products of Jennifer and me, which also brings positives and negatives.

Children learn what they live. They watch us, consciously and unconsciously; mentally, they are taking notes because they will follow our behavior down the road. This is all the more reason that parents should nurture their children, help them, and believe in them. John's introduction to Mary's relationship with Jesus teaches us that we should not only know our children; we should believe in them.

After recording this first miracle, John does not mention the mother of Jesus again until the end of his gospel, where we find the gripping scene of the crucifixion with four women and one man watching. Mary, her sister, Clopas' wife Mary, and Mary Magdalene were the four women; John was the lone male. The other disciples had boasted about how far they would follow Jesus, yet only John accompanied Jesus to the cross. These women and John followed Jesus into his darkest hour. Chapter nineteen tells us that they stood near the cross.

What would possess someone to risk their life to watch something as emotionally painful as the death of her own son? Love. She had been proud of her Son; just three short years earlier, she had encouraged him to provide wine for a wedding. She was probably recognized by many as Jesus' mother.

I imagine that many of his followers shared pleasant conversation with Mary; after all, she had raised him, and she had to be proud of how he was following God's mission, of how he was living into his identity. He had performed so many good deeds: he had brought sight to the blind, strengthened the legs of the crippled, removed the disease from the lepers, and brought acceptance to the outcasts. Jesus was a celebrity, and Mary was his mother.

But now, despite all these good deeds, Mary was watching her own son die. Cruelly. Barbarically. In the song Jennifer shared, Mary said, "As I recall all he showed is love, why can't you show him the same?" In exchange for the love that Jesus shared, he received a cross. And his mother received a broken heart.

Can you imagine how Mary must have felt? Given her faith, ambition, and dreams for her son, she had to have been distraught. I wonder if she questioned her parenting skills. No one expects to see their child like this. If she had made some different parenting decisions, would she be staring at her dying son? Could she have been misguided? "Powerless" doesn't come close to describing how she must have felt.

As the mother of the Son of God, she had taken her responsibilities seriously. She had done all the right things; and as a result, she was now seeing her oldest son dying in front of her. The suffering on her face was second only to the agony on Jesus' face. Although Jesus was the one who was physically dying, a part of his mother was dying too.

Some of you know first hand what it is like to lose a child. The experience never leaves you; the grief is seemingly overwhelming at times. Its effects are devastating. Mary knew that kind of pain.

The song imagined Mary saying, "I'd gladly die in your place, if I could save you some pain." That is a description of a mother in the truest sense. Not all women who give birth are mothers utilizing our concept of motherhood; maternal instincts are evident in the sacrificial love extended to their children.

Verse 26 says that they stood near the cross. Indeed that is where God wants mothers to stand today; God wants parents to stand near their children's pain. Parents should not run from a child's pain but instead should run to a child's pain. Children have an innate desire to be needed and wanted. As parents, we are to come running when our children need us.

First, we need to be present. During the times of scraped knees or teenage crises, our children need to know that we care. Saying, "I'll always be there for you," needs to carry over into our presence. We too have to "stand near the crosses" of our children. If we don't, someone else will. Children growing up in today's culture face far greater pressures than you and I ever imagined. Our children must know that we will always be there for them, standing near whatever difficulty may arise.

Parents should be more than present; we need to be supportive and empathetic. We need to feel the pain of our children. Our acceptance of our children will be shown if we stand near their crosses with broken hearts.

Continuing to grant unconditional love to our children despite what they have said or done to us is the test. It is easy to love people when the roles are fulfilled, and the apple cart has not been upset. When there is apple sauce everywhere, and it doesn't even taste good, we are still called to love.

But the children have responsibilities also. Despite his pain, Jesus recognized that his mother would need someone. As I mentioned, Mary certainly had no status. Some unmarried women were even sold as slaves. Jesus declared that John would now serve as her son, taking responsibility for her and her welfare. Mary would serve as his second mother. We utilize the phrase "She was like a mother to me." Jesus placed this understanding into practice.

On the cross, Jesus had taken on the cares of the world, yet he was still concerned with the care of his own mother. We could all learn a lesson here. The attention given to parents is often crowded out by busy schedules, time-consuming hobbies, or work responsibilities. The responsibility of a child caring for aging parents is not a new concept. Before Jesus took his last breath, he made certain that his mother received proper care. Parents have an enormous challenge in raising their children, but from the cross, Jesus communicated that children also have responsibilities.

So on this Mother's Day, parents are encouraged to know your children, believe in them, and run to their pain. Most of all, love your children. Jesus did not forget his mother, even while he was dying. Today, let's not forget our mothers either.

And most importantly, give gratitude to God for never forgetting us, for giving us hope by believing in us, for loving us unconditionally, for being present with us in pain and in joy; for that is the style of parenting which needs to be modeled today.

Thanks be to God for being such a wonderful heavenly parent.