

öGood News for Maryö
Acts 1: 6 ó 14 John 17: 1 ó 11
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Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a bit of a mystery to us. We have heard the stories of her early experiences as mother of Jesus, and we wonder at what she might have felt in this auspicious role. We expect that she was very kind, and doctrine tells us that she must have been övirginally, and in all other ways, perfect in order to have been the öMother of Godö. It is tempting to leave her on the divine pedestal, but I would invite us to bring her down to Earth so that we can learn from her.

We can imagine that she had conflicted feelings as she observed Jesus throughout his life and ministry. If we are, or have been, parents ourselves, we don't have to imagine. We know what it feels like to watch children grow into adulthood. We don't hear much about Mary other than she tended to remember things, öpondering them in her heart.ö During Holy week, we grieved with her, remembering how she stood by, watching her son being crucified.

I wonder what we might have tried to say in an attempt to comfort her.

Some time ago, I attended a monthly meeting of the Susquehanna Association Authorized Ministers. The group meets regularly for discussion, support, education, and prayer. The theme for this particular meeting continued a previous presentation on Evil. One exercise we did was consider our own experiences of loss and disaster, wondering if it was evil, and looking at what people said to us when they were trying to be helpful or comforting. We also noted whether they, in fact, were helpful. Often attempts to help do not help.

So I wonder what we might have said to Mary. Would we have told her not to worry, it was God's will? Would we have expressed our anger and confusion at how such a terrible thing could happen to so wonderful a young man? Would we have speculated that God needed him more in heaven? Would we have said that she was fortunate that she had other children to occupy her concerns?

Probably, none of those statements would have been particularly helpful.

It makes me think about the role of parenting. My son is now 28 years old, so in some senses, my role has changed from what it was just a few years ago. To be a parent is an enormous undertaking. In addition to our own hopes for our children, society places some heavy expectations on us as parents and on our children as well. Society wants them to be good citizens, to fit in. They are supposed to become educated so they can be gainfully employed and contribute to the good of all. They are supposed to be creative, but not challenge the values that have been handed to them. And, of course, they are supposed to get married and have children. According to these measures, Jesus didn't do very well. He was always challenging the authorities. He was in trouble a good deal of the time. Often, people wanted to kill him. There is no indication that he made a good living. He never did get to buy that first house, and there was never any possibility of grandchildren for Mary and Joseph. Some of the more conservative

among them might have called him a bum who convinced others to go "bumming around" with him.

We can wonder about conversations that might have taken place over coffee in Mary's kitchen. "So, Mary, What's Jesus up to these days? I hear he's hanging around with that Mary from Magdala. (I don't think she's good enough for him, but I still pray to God that he will provide you with a grandchild one of these days.)

Joseph has been working pretty hard, lately. When is Jesus going to settle down and give him some help? He was always such a good boy. You'd think he'd learn some carpentry to give Joseph a break.

I hear that his friends call him Rabbi. Maybe he'll come and serve in our synagogue so you can see him more.

Oh, Mary, Is Jesus in trouble again? I hear that he said such offensive things that they threw him out of town. You'd better talk to that young man before something really bad happens.

Mary, I don't like to be a gossip, but I heard that Jesus is hanging around with tax collectors, and sinners, and prostitutes. Doesn't he know what he is doing to your family name with that behavior? I feel so badly for you.

Oh Mary, I hear he's going to Jerusalem. They hate him there. Does he have a death wish or something? What are you going to do?

Maybe some of you have heard statements like that from well-meaning friends when your children have taken a path that others don't understand or approve of. Maybe, also, you have made those statements to yourself or to your children. If that's all we have, parenting becomes a painful and thankless activity.

So let's look at Mary again to see if we can come up with another perspective.

Instead of giving advice or asking unanswerable questions, I am suggesting that we could try listening. We might learn things like these:

She was in pain and had sustained a personal loss of enormous magnitude. On the other hand, she had all those memories that she had been pondering in her heart. Perhaps she heard good news in his statement that he had accomplished what he had set out to do. He had grown into the man he needed to be in order to fulfill his mission. He had gathered about him the people who would carry the message to the world. He had taught them about love, about community, and about reliance on God's presence. He had shown them a way of understanding God so that they didn't have to be afraid. He had demonstrated in so many ways that God's love was infinite for them, and that they simply needed to share it with one another. In short, he had grown into the man that his integrity dictated.

Today's gospel reading is truly good news for Mary. While it does not address her loss or the pain of watching Jesus go through his difficult experiences, it does ground her in the real purpose of parenting, which is:

To help our children grow into fully functional adults, and to follow their calling to be who they really are. Jesus is a huge success in both these areas. He is the epitome of the fully functional adult, who knows who he is, and who behaves in a way that is not reactive. Clearly, he followed

his calling, and in this moving prayer to God, he rejoices that he has accomplished what he was sent to accomplish.

I am convinced that Mary could recognize her supportive participation in Jesus's process of coming into adulthood. She nurtured him, loved him, and gave him the experience of knowing that existence, complete with God's presence, can be trusted. The language in his prayer is about the mission that God sent him on, but Mary's presence as a loving and supportive mother is embedded in every line.

This leaves us with two questions. Can we affirm that our children are growing or have grown into fully functional adults who are truly themselves? And can we affirm that we, ourselves, are fully functional adults who are following our respective callings. The life of faith requires that we be ourselves and that we live out our identity with courage and clarity.

Finally, we can take it a notch higher. What is true for individuals is often true for organizations. So, we might ask, "Is this church growing into its fully functional self? And, is it learning to live out its God-given purpose. As you go through your interim time, these questions will necessarily be with you.