

These are My Mother and Brothers

2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5 (10) B, 2021

You feel for them, or at least I do, Jesus's mother and brothers. "What's he done now?" his mother asks, when her boys come home and say, "You better come quick, Ma. He's at it again." "He's on fire, and everyone's there," replies one of them, probably James, the second oldest, the one closest to him but least like him. "Some of the scribes even came down from Jerusalem this time, to see it with their own eyes."

"My God," his mother says, thinking to herself, *Ain't it the truth. It's bad enough him going on all day and night around here about how he has real work to do, out there, not stuck in here with all this wood and nails. Don't even talk to me about all the fuss in that synagogue the other week. Enough, Jesus, enough!*

"He's healing people, casting out demons, telling them their sins are forgiven," Joses, another brother, the middle child, the one most like his father, says. "They're not happy,"

"What, the people getting healed and all?"

"No, the scribes, the scribes," Simon, the third brother, says. "The ones who interpret the law." Not that he didn't want to be one, mind you.

"Lawyers," his mother says. "What do they know?"

"Ma," James says, "They know the law – and your son's not following it."

"Is it working?" she asks. "I mean, is he really healing people? He always said he could, but your father and I didn't believe it."

“Yeah,” Simon replies. “The blind see, the dumb speak, and the lame walk. Then he tells them, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ That’s what upsets the lawyers.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because he’s not doing it right,” Simon says. “He’s doesn’t want them to pay, he doesn’t do the sacrifices. He just...says it. Like he means it. And they listen.”

“How many people?” she asks.

“Hundreds,” they say. “Maybe thousands. That’s also got them upset in Jerusalem. Crowds they don’t control give them the willies.”

“Serves them right,” she says.

“He’s gonna get in trouble,” James says. “This won’t end well.”

“I think it’s cool,” chimes in Jude, the youngest, “He’s the boss.”

“No, he’s not,” Joses says. “He just thinks he is.”

Mary considers this; she must do. She’s known from the very beginning, in a way that only a mother can, that her son was meant for something special. She could feel it before he was born, and could see it in him even when he was a child.

Bratty, precocious, pre-occupied, a right pain in the you-know-what to his father, never having time for his chores or his work, always with his head in a scroll or off somewhere by himself, talking to the sky when he thought no-one was watching, furious at the way things were and how bad people’s lives were but then, all of a sudden, oddly calm. “I’m gonna change the world, Ma,” he told her. “I can feel it. I know that I am.”

“Are you scared, son?” she’d asked.

“No,” he lied, then said, “Maybe.”

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“You should be,” she told him, thinking to herself, *I know I am*.

I think that’s what did it: the crowds. It wasn’t that he went around healing people or eating wheat from the field on the Sabbath, or got under the skin of the prissy Pharisees or the ink-nosed scribes. What kind of people whine about someone helping other people out? She wasn’t even all that bothered by him casting out demons, though she wondered where they went after he did it; demons don’t just go back to whatever hell they came from just because a sharp young man tells them to. All of that seemed to be what he was called to do, the only things that made him happy, or as close to happy as he got. She’d given up years ago on her dream of having him take over Joseph’s shop, marry a nice girl from down the road, give her one of a teen mom’s only blessings: grandchildren while she’s still young. She still wasn’t sure he shouldn’t join up with them, the scribes or the Pharisees, maybe even those crazy dream-eaters out in the desert, the Essenes, I think they called them, celibates bathing in dust to purify their souls.

But Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph, was not born to take orders from anyone, so none of that would work, not for long. When he started following his cousin John around and getting that same look in his eye, that crazy look, the one that someone gets who can say “Repent!” and you do, or “Your sins are forgiven” and you believe them, she knew it was only a matter of time. He’d be off on the road, preaching and teaching, healing and all the rest, until one law or other caught up with him and that would be that. They’d told her as much when he was a baby: “And a sword shall pierce thy heart also.” She had a pretty good idea what that meant, but what can you do?

But the crowds surprised her – that he could draw them, and how much loved it. “He’s out of his mind,” James had said, “If he thinks he can get away with that.” She had to agree. When James said, “We have to go talk to him, get him to stop,”

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and the rest nodded their heads – all but Jude, her baby – she knew they were right, so went along. “I’ll talk to him,” she told them. “I’ll get him to stop, or at least slow down.”

So off they go, the five of them, Mary and Jesus’s four brothers – James, Joses, Simon, and Jude – to talk to him, the eldest, supposed to be the man of the house now that their father Joseph’s passed, as it says in today’s gospel. *I’ll talk to him*, Mary kept telling herself. *He’ll listen to me*.

But he didn’t. He wouldn’t come out to see them, wouldn’t even let them in. “These are my mother and my brothers,” he said, wildly, crazily, pointing to a crowd of strangers pressing on him, resonating with his power, feeding on his every word, hungry for real food he was in no position to give them but even hungrier for the spiritual food he couldn’t stop giving. He loved it, was you might say almost drunk with it, I’m doing it, Ma, I’m changing the world, right here, right now, with all these people and would you look at their faces, see the light come back into them, watch the hope spark up in their eyes? These are my people, my tribe, my family, my lost sheep, hewers of wood and drawers of water, the battered and the bruised, the used and the abused, victims of both lawlessness and law, the people, all of them. The people I grew up with, the mother who bore me and nursed me, raised me, taught me, took care of me, the brothers who came along one after the other, mewling, messing things up, getting in the way before eventually becoming painfully normal? I don’t need ‘em. For all I care, they can talk to the hand.

It must’ve hit them like a body blow or a blow from the air, to use a phrase from Hilary Mantel. Just who does this Jesus think he is? Did our brother just say...he wasn’t anymore? Did my son just throw me over for all these strangers? You come right over here, Jesus, and I’ll give you “these are my mother and my brothers”

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right where you won't forget it, Mary might've said. Or she might've wept, or most likely just stood there dumb with astonishment. How dare he? How dare he?! But dare, he did, and James would've been the first to notice it, then Simon, then Joses, but probably never Jude until they told him – notice a smile start to spread on her face, a Mona Lisa is-it-really-there smile, recognition and acceptance and resignation all at once: he's done. He's free, he's gone. He's actually going to do this and doesn't need us anymore – and apparently doesn't want us anymore. He's not lost his mind; he's found it – and he doesn't need me, doesn't need us, not anymore. My son has become the man God wanted him to be, at last, like a lion or an elephant ready to venture on his own, the way John was when he left my cousin's house for the wilderness for good. He doesn't work for the devil and he's not trying to divide our people, and knows that a divided house can't stand. He knows he can't stay here with us, so he left. He knows he can't stay quiet any longer, so he's saying it all out loud. He knows he has to bring them together, work for everyone, cast out the demons from our souls and our people. He can't do it if we're divided, and he can't do it if he's divided. He has to go – completely and for good – and he knows it. Finally, he's said it out loud, in front of witnesses, where everyone can hear. I can do more for him; we can do no more for him at home. Now it's his time to leave, to fly, to be free.

It's not easy for a mother to let go her son, or a father his daughter, I've come to realize, when they've come fully of age and into their own: fledged, changed, matured, grown. They don't need you anymore in the ways they have done. They may still need you, but as one adult can need another, which is different from how a child needs an adult, or a host of them, to grow with and for and from. There comes a moment, anticipated but never looked-for, when you look into the eyes of your child and realize that he, she is no longer a child, no longer dependent emotionally or intellectually, or even spiritually, on the parent they made you

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become simply by coming, helpless and needy and cute, into being. You have done what you set out to do: you have done all you can to make a person. Now that person has made themselves, and is on their own. Oh, sure, it might go all pear-shaped later on and they move back home sometime in the middle of life to re-set, re-charge, re-new, and re-grow, but they'll never be a child again, but an adult in world in which adulting is rarely simple and never easy. They may make children of their own and raise them, and you may get to sit with your children and your children's children beneath your own vines and fig tree, with none to trouble any of you, as the biblical promise goes.

But even if they do not, even if they live but a short time longer, flame out in a blaze of glory as Mary's firstborn child was to do, fighting the curse God gave the serpent as well as the curses God gave to the first people who ever lived, as Genesis describes, undoing the failures at the heart of God's creation of humanity itself, failures we experience as our capacity to suffer and to sin and to do evil and like it, it will be a blessing. It will be enough. At least, as Mary no doubt prayed on her way home, let it be enough. Lord, I'm begging you, and you started this: finish it right. Do it right this time; make life a blessing for real. Make sure all this has been worth it. Make sure it's enough. *Amen.*