

Mary: Not so Humble Anymore

Alia Schubbe, ETS Seminarian

Chilson Hills Church, Brighton, Michigan

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Today is Mother's Day, so we're departing from the current theme to think a little bit about Jesus' mother. As Protestants, we tend to approach the subject of Mary, the mother of Jesus, with a great deal of caution- and that's not without good reason. We avoid cherishing images of her in our churches and homes, or in our gardens. We don't crown representations of her "Queen of Heaven" with wreaths of real flowers every May, the month of spring renewal devoted to her by the Roman and other orthodox churches. We do not profess that she appears to children in remote grottoes or pastures, or anywhere.

Mary was raised to that level of special love in the early Middle Ages, when the people were faced by a terrible new sickness the English called the Black Death; where records exist we know it wiped out 60-75% of major cities. Many believed the disease was sent to them by God the Father to punish them for terrible sin among the people, and they did everything they could think of to do penance for that sin- long hours of prayer, days of fasting, public self-torture. They killed "witches" (women with herb knowledge, who might actually have helped some of the sick) they killed witches' "familiars:" cats that might have killed the rats that carried the plague and the fleas that passed it to humans.) When God would not take away the punishing plague after all this so-called penance- when "Father" said "no," the people did what children still do: they turned to Mary- "Mother"- and hid their faces in her robes, seeking comfort.

That church ancestral, from which the Protestant Reformation movement descended, never forgot that time when Mary seemed their only source of comfort. They maintain a special relationship with her that we do not, such as keeping special seasons and names for her.

Yet- there are other things that Christians as a whole don't seem to see about Mary.

Whenever I've heard a sermon about Mary it never gets past the visit from the angel Gabriel in Luke's Gospel. Mary hears from Gabriel that she, a virgin engaged to the man Joseph, has been chosen by God to carry God's Son, "who will be called the Son of the Most High." Mary's reply is recorded by Luke, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Bible studies stop right here. Even sermons stop here: we all nod agreement, oh yes, Mary was humble and obedient. Except when we just note that she was humble. Or just obedient, depending on the Bible study or the sermon that day. We forget to go on to the verses that follow, or if we do read them, we forget to notice what Mary says about her own feelings in the Magnificat. It is as though we will allow her to sing out her praise to God, but we will not let her recognize and sing her joy in her condition! Mary's first words in her song tell us that she glories in the Lord and *in what He has done for her!* She is aware of and rejoicing in her pregnancy, and she knows that all future generations will call her "blessed." It is only *after* this that she affirms herself as a humble servant, grateful for God's attention. Remember that "Blessed mother" stuff I said a little while ago? No, we don't have to say it- but it seems to me that we ought to remember that she *knew* how blessed she was about to become.

For the rest of her life, we only see her- if we see her at all- as a passive hanger-on, clinging to the hem of her Son's garment, so to speak.

Yet, it just may be Mary isn't the meek, mild creature we have taken her for over 2000 years. She may not be just the passive recipient of Gabriel's greeting, who shows up in Renaissance paintings as the eyes-down-cast, idealized maiden. She couldn't be- not to take on the task God gave her! This is first century Palestine, and she is engaged to marry a man of standing in the community! Her family has standing of its own, and the honor of both rests, now, on her purity.

For Mary to say, "Let it be done to me as you have said," didn't take simplicity, didn't take mild obedience, didn't take the passive, eyes-downcast maiden the painters would have us think she was. This was an act of courage as well as faith! Do you know what they did to unwed mothers in 1st Century Palestine? At best, they were cast out, forced into begging, prostitution, starvation and disease- an early, ugly death. More often, they were taken outside the village and stoned. Mary knew exactly what she was risking to accept what God was asking of her. This woman was more than obedient- she was strong- she was a spitfire! She had to be, because the life ahead of her was going to be a difficult one, and God knew it! He chose her well, and if the great painters of Europe had been able to see it, they would have painted, not a wisp of a girl interrupted in prayer, but a healthy, strong girl already helping her mother run the home for her father, brothers, and extended family. As for Joseph, even before an angel came and told him to believe Mary, he planned to set her aside quietly. It wasn't to save her embarrassment; it was to save her life!

But, to return to Mary. Fast forward, we don't exactly know how many years. There is a wedding at Cana, not far from the family home. Mary is attending with Jesus and her other children. Two things you need to know- this is a culture in which honor and shame are important social currencies. I really mean that, they are like the money of a person or a family's social standing within the community. Weddings are the business of the young man and his family. The bride, veiled, is paraded to his house with a music and singing: you can still see this kind of wedding in the Middle East, India, Pakistan, and other places with cultures are related to this one. To really build up the groom's and his family's honor "bank accounts," the wedding is going to last as many as ten days, and the food and wine will flow throughout. Members of the public will be invited. The household women will celebrate in a separate area from the men, which protects their honor and the family honor. Now- crisis! The wine has run out! This is a disaster! The wedding feast is far from over, but the groom, his family, and all of their connections are about to be shamed in front of the whole village!

Somehow, quietly, Mary has found out about the impending social disaster to the groom's family. So, she goes to Jesus- this tells us that Joseph has died and Jesus is now head of the family- and tells him what has happened. To our ears, his reply seems gratingly arrogant: "Woman, what does this have to do with you or with me? My hour has not yet come."

Here's the rest of the culture lesson- recall that the men and women celebrated separately. In their day-to-day lives, they were generally separate, too- men went to fields and workshops, women went out in groups as far as the village well, then spent their days at home caring for and teaching young children, cleaning and cooking. By 6 or 7 years of age, little boys went with their fathers. If respectable women went to public areas dominated by the men- the workshops, or the courts- they were not addressed by name. Should a man call a woman by her name in public, it would be an offense against honor, and the head of the woman's would take it to the court.

Therefore- we know that when Mary and Jesus spoke, they were in the area where the men were celebrating, or in a transitional area of the groom's house, between the men's and women's areas. OK, 21st Century Americans, we can now put that aside. What happens next? Well, I think he just said "No," but Mary goes to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Jesus tells them to fill 6 large containers, roughly 30 of our gallons each, with water. Then he tells them to draw some out and take it to the headwaiter, who exclaims to the *bridegroom* that most people give out the best wine first, and save the lesser stuff for when people are (to be honest) too tipsy to care.

It was and is expected in the Middle East that adult children, even heads of families, will obey their mothers- although the family heads have the right to refuse. Which Jesus did, at first. So what was happening here? *She knew*. Jesus himself objected, said the time was not right for his public ministry to begin, but this strong woman, this spit-fire of a woman that God chose to be his mother, she *knew* it was time, she disregarded his refusal, and she kick-started him into it.

What is going on here? *She knew*. This was not just her son, the little boy she carried and nursed and taught baby games to. She *knew* that this young man was the human face of God, she *knew* he was the Promised

One, *she knew* it was time for him to begin his public ministry- even when his very human nature was not yet ready to see it. Do you doubt his humanity? Remember, facing death in the garden, the night before his Crucifixion, he was terrified and asked the Father to let that cup pass him by. Yet, when the Father would not let it pass by, the Son went willingly, he died and rose again, because he was and is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the human face of God the Father!

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And Mary, oh, Mary, his very human mother- she *knew*.

And why a wedding? Why the wine? Remember- weddings of the time- these were feasts prepared by *the groom*. Mary's son, God's Son, knowingly provided the best of the wine: he is the Messiah, he is the Bridegroom, and the church is his bride!

And his mother, the not-simple, not-so humble small town girl: she *knew*.