

“Mama Jesus” (13May18)
Philippians 2:1-13; Psalm 103

God the Father decided to take on the reputation of a mother.

These might become too rigid and overblown of gender categories, and while asking your forgiveness for operating in old binary patterns, and also observing my own lamentable lack of expertise, still please chase through this with me, for a helpful model of what’s in Philippians, with an astonishing view of our faith.

(I believe that most helpful is portraying separated lovers, longing to be together. But I’m not sure I managed to convince Bible study of that in over six hours of conversation last month. So we’ll try this other maternal approximation.)

I want to start by saying that this is probably one of the most important passages in our New Testament, and is also probably one of the earliest, showing how the first Christians were making sense of this.

And with that, I want you to notice it’s portraying a radical shift. Our Psalm for today may stand for some contrast. Other than the language I obviously adapted to include a mother rather than a father, you can get a sense of standard domineering and patriarchal imagery. It’s a hierarchy, a system of stratification or classification for ruling. In the portrayal of the Psalm, which fits not only a view common in lots of the Bible, but would fit with many other cultures’ or religions’ views of divinity, the highest ruler is in the highest heaven, with subsidiary and subservient and lower being beneath. The “throne of the LORD” may encapsulate this vision for us, even though mostly we’ve never lived under monarchies and kings. Such a lord gives commands and expects obedience while he rules over others.

Whether this view of gods shaped the order of society or vice versa, the pattern is repeated in our dominant and domineering structures. A lone male stands at the top, giving orders and demanding allegiance from the ranks below. Some of you have been the boss or head honcho.

Others may be more familiar with serving as underlings and minions.

It’s not just in our jobs or corporate structure, though; it gets much more intimate. From the Greco-Roman society in which Paul was writing still too often to our own time, the pattern has been that the male is head of the household, that the role of children is obedience, that (in the infamous word of Ephesians, a letter not by Paul), wives are to be subject to husbands.

The old economic order of households added masters over slaves to this pattern of the one central male, which is worth knowing simply to see how this glorious refrain of Philippians turns the pattern on its head, redefining an order of society by showing a new template for the divine. Instead of the central head master as the embodiment of god, Jesus becomes the slave. Here the Father is responsive to this pattern-breaking disobedient Son.

And let’s see the new form as the practice of a mother.

In those rejected patterns of patriarchy, we’d be stuck with the top dog male insisting on orders and expecting obedience. The way to prove yourself in such a system would be to follow the orders and move up the ranks. You’re trying to get higher and higher, and to put other people beneath you. That is the definition of power and of glory. What that is saying—again with apologies for overgeneralizing and perhaps not representing your own families, but still to sum up the stereotype—is that you prove yourself, make accomplishments, and a father’s love is earned.

A mother’s love, for the reverse pattern, is given. You work up to a father. A mother comes down to you.

This is what I want us to hear in the Philippians Christ Hymn today. When it says that Jesus humbled himself and took the form of a slave, becoming obedient, I want you to hear the example of a mother to her child.

Think of one who poured herself out and gave of her very self, her very body, in nursing. Think of one who is willing to deal with feces, to change stinky diapers—that’s serving in my book, and

sure seems like it takes some humility! Think of one who is up late at night doing laundry and up early packing lunches. Think of one who hears cries in the middle of the night, gives up sleep, stoops to scoop up and cradle and comfort. Think of the mom taxi who drops everything to ferry and cart kids from activity to activity to activity. Think of one who gives up her life to make another life possible. Think of one who gushes even through gawky growth spurts and who is so proud of you just for being who you are, no matter how big your part or how strong your performance. Think of a mom who wants to know about every last thing happening to be in touch and who cries at every parting, for whom as much as she can get, it is never enough.

Jesus is like that, that kind of servant, so dedicated to you, to caring for you. Not because you've proven yourself or earned it. Just because he adores you, loves you, is completely committed to you. It's not his Father to whom he's obedient in this passage. He is obedient to you, responding to your sleepless crying, to your stinky waste, to supporting your poor performance.

Here's a paraphrase of Philippians to help you hear it: *Christ Jesus, who could've been like the usual gods, being all high and mighty, did not consider godliness to be proven in trying to claim more, but poured himself out, taking the form of a mother, and humbled himself to the point of giving up his life.*

In that, God also exalted him, so that all should admit that Jesus Christ is LORD, changing even the very reputation and identity of God.

As remarkable as the start is—that God would not want to be identified on a throne, but stooping to be the slave, that God's love is never earned but is poured into life for you—the ending puts the exclamation point on it. It declares that the typical god, the god of the Psalm, the god supposedly seen in Caesar, the highest controller, the sternest demander could no longer be the true God. For our categories today, God essentially gave up being a Father and put all of God's chips into the kind of God who would be a mother. That

is what is identified as the highest, the best, the most correct. Not a god you earn your way up to. A God who comes down to you. Not with power as power over, but as power for. Whose glory isn't in being so separate, so much more perfect than you, but in sharing your stinky imperfect needy life.

I hope you pause to appreciate how stunning it is that this God of Jesus is for you.

But if you're asking what it means for what you do next, that's some of what Paul is working on in this letter. He says that having this sort of God eliminates striving to get ahead as the right way to live. The god of patriarchy is wrong. The god of corporate advancement and militant strength is wrong. The god of making you feel ashamed for what you haven't accomplished is wrong. Selfishness only leads to empty glory, not the glory of this God. This God's glory and joy is in offering love.

What Paul commends, then, is having the same perspective, the same mind, the same shape or form of life as this God of love, this way embodied in Jesus, this way like a mother who lowers herself wholeheartedly and naturally to love, to work that out with shock and astonishment for it being so revolutionary, so vital, so filled with good pleasure.

With that, I want to offer two closing perspectives, to be heard as you need.

First, you may need to hear that this undoes your ways, undoes your old ambitions, upends vain strivings, refuses your rankings, and disqualifies your supposed status. If you were thinking you were better than others, you may need an instruction that you should look lower and start serving.

On the other hand, you may need to hear this differently. Much too often this remarkable message is warped back into an accusation, that you should think even less of yourself and put up with your misery. Particularly for referencing this in conjunction with mothers, I have heard a lot from you mothers—as well as from fathers and from you generally as people in our competitive society—that you are continuously bombarded by

feelings of inadequacy, that society makes you feel you're not doing enough, not creative enough, not busy enough, not perfect enough to be raising your kids right or living as you ought. That is trying to warp this back into a hierarchy.

I know you are often worn out, exhausted, wondering, feeling used up. It's not tireless effort but tire-full. I do believe there's some of that that probably does and must go with this kind of Jesus love that pours ourselves out, that so continuously is trying to be responsive. It *does* use you up.

But! this isn't trying to tell you to do more, to use yourself up more, to be dead quicker. This is exalting and celebrating that you love, that your care and concern is exactly in the pattern of God, that—even though it's not easy—there is nothing greater than that you love. Not in proving yourself by raising the best child who turns out to be whatever as an adult. Not in how picture perfect it all looks on the outside. Simply in your loving, you are describing and replicating the form of our God. Let's be grateful for that.

And when you collapse and can do no more, when you need the care and are crying and feeling fractured, again and always, remember that not in what you do, but that our heart is in who this God is for you, enslaved, loving, striving for your joy, your shared pleasure, your life.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.