

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: Valuing Family and Prophecy in Christian Motherhood

by Jane Barter Moulaison

I begin this article with an anecdote drawn from my own experiences of mothering; unfortunately, not one of the tender moments drawn from the hallowed vignettes of my repository of good moments; but rather, from one of those ordinary days of a harried mother trying simultaneously to launch an academic career, while caring for the mind, body and spirits of two rather rambunctious pre-schoolers. So here I was on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, bringing my daughter to ballet class where all the home-schooling, Jesus-loving, stay-at-home mothers who nurse each of their fifteen children to puberty bring their daughters. And each of these kids follows her respective mom like a sweet little duckling quietly into the conservatory while I can only manage to get my two into class through alternately offering chocolate and spewing idle threats (“If you don’t hurry up, I will vacuum up all your Lego blocks!”) In any event, once my *princess* is delivered to class, I find myself with my chocolate eating, Lego-playing son, listening to endless stories of home births, family beds, and most disturbing of all — praying to Jesus for yet another child. Now don’t get me wrong — I love my children more than life itself, but I also love my work, and I have managed to convince myself that Jesus doesn’t really want me to learn how to make my food, much less my clothes, from scratch. And so I got to thinking about how Christian reflection about motherhood, like Christian reflection about most political issues these days, has become deeply polarized. It will therefore be my task in this article, first to identify the polarization in a world that is larger than my daughter’s ballet class, and second, to offer something of a biblical and theological account of motherhood by looking at the relationship between the particular bonds of family society and the universal and prophetic call of the gospel. I shall

do so through examining the story of the encounter of Jesus with the woman of Samaria.

The current impasse

If one were simply to listen to popular Christian media, my ballet-Mom sisters would surely be vindicated, and my own position on motherhood, much less that of Christian women who have elected not to become mothers, would clearly seem heretical.

Consider the widely popular radio program, "Focus on the Family," founded by James C. Dobson, which is heard daily on more than 3,000 radio facilities in more than 95 countries. The mission of "Focus on the Family" could hardly be less ambiguous about the relationship between Christianity and family.

To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in disseminating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible, and, specifically, to accomplish that objective by helping to preserve traditional values and the institution of the family.¹

Dobson's ministry elaborates upon this mission with five guiding principles, which I will refrain from going into right now, save to note that, according to number five, God has ordained three basic institutions: the church, the family and the government for the benefit of humankind. Clearly, these institutions stand in mutual support of one another, offering a description of family life that has become familiar within our context: the family exists to serve the state. The church also buttresses these other institutions as "divinely ordained". Dobson and his followers are enshrining a civil religion, where Christian identity is easily conflated with nationalism. The vehicle for the creation of both saint and citizen is the family unit.

In spite of the ubiquity of such easy identification between church, state, and family, this was not always the case within Christian history, and critics of the Christian right have rightly pointed out how such a "focus on the family" is a peculiarly modern phenomenon for Christians, having more to do with the privatization

¹ <http://www.family.org/welcome/aboutfof/a0005554.cfm>, accessed October 21, 2003.

of spirituality and family life as a haven from the assaults upon workers' lives in the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. It is here that the modern nuclear family, consisting of a mom, a dad and some kids, was born. The separation of workplace and home during this period had serious consequences for women. The care of the domestic sphere became the primary responsibility of women, and motherhood took on new meaning, as childhood and children came to be valued, as did those typically feminine characteristics — intuition, affectivity, and nurturance. While women were esteemed for these feminine qualities, such valorization came at the high cost of forfeiting the public sphere and increasingly, in the trivialization and infantilization of women. As the Romantic Christian text *par excellence*, Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve: A Dialogue on the Incarnation* has one of its female characters, Karoline, state: "We have at last applied the correct interpretation to the old proverb that ... women go right on being children while ... men must be converted anew to become so again."²

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether undertakes the deconstruction of such a sentimentalized view of the nuclear family in her book, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, and goes on to claim that the Christian right's romanticization of family values is, in reality, a cipher for its real aim, which is the social control of women. The return to "family values", argues Ruether, is really a return to a socially-sanctioned marginalization of women through an according of religious meaning to family life and women's domestic roles. In truth, argues Ruether, nothing could be further from the historical truth of Jesus of Nazareth than to identify him with "family values." As Ruether states:

... [T]he historical Jesus in fact appears quite often to have endorsed views that might be characterized as "antifamily."³

² Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*, trans. T. Tice (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967) p. 337.

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon, 2000) p. 3.

Because Christian families have always been determined by cultural and social pressures, it is entirely inappropriate, argues Ruether, to sanction one type of family and consider it the prototype of Christian life. Better, she claims, to prophecy against “family values” and institutionalized motherhood, just as Jesus challenged the oppressive constructions of family that existed within his own time as he charged his followers to leave behind their familial bonds for the sake of the gospel:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brother and sisters, yes, and even his own life, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14: 26)⁴

Ruether is fond of this quote, as well as other instances where Jesus calls his people to challenge the idolatry of family (Matthew 8:21-22; Matthew 10:34-38; Mark 2:31-35), but I wonder if she is missing something vital in her interpretation of this text: that is, does this passage not *take for granted* that families, “natural” relationships, and indeed life, are compelling, attractive, and even extraordinarily *good*? The just-mentioned quotation from Luke is one of those hard eschatological sayings — it is as painful and difficult as Jesus’ injunction to give away all our possessions — which he pronounces in the next breath (v. 34). This is one of those statements which is misconstrued if read chiefly as an ethical dictum, as law, without reference to the gospel of the new society of the kingdom — one that is constituted by nothing more basic than a willingness to follow Jesus. Insofar as family, synagogue, possessions, and indeed, *our own lives* impede us from following Christ, they are to be rejected. Again, this is not an abstract rejection of the family that Jesus is issuing here; but insofar as our membership within human family prohibits our membership within the new society of the kingdom into which we are called, we are in serious jeopardy.

⁴ This and the other biblical quotations in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Biblical

How, then, do we reconcile these confusing messages of the gospel: a gospel, which on the one hand affirms the particularity of relationships (Why else would Jesus offer those hard teachings also on the irrevocability of the marriage covenant? Why else would Jesus weep over his dead friend, Lazarus? Why else would Jesus brood over Jerusalem?) while on the other hand, prophetically challenge those very relationships, so utterly central to the fabric of human living? How does the universal, prophetic calling to the ends of the earth remain in creative tension with concreteness and the blessing of life together among a distinct group of people? And what does this mean for the Christian woman who is at once a mother entangled in the intimacy of primary relationships, profoundly and bodily responsible for the nurturance of her children, while she is likewise called to a prophetic office — to challenge precisely those bonds and relations, lest they become idolatrous impediments to her participation in the kingdom of God? While Ruether does well to challenge us to embrace the kingdom's prophetic demands, she may too easily dismiss the blessing that God grants us precisely as wives, mothers and daughters — as members of a human family.

I will attempt to tease out something of such an understanding by considering John's story of the encounter of Jesus with the woman of Samaria (John 4: 1-42). This is an unusual place to reflect upon motherhood, for although this woman is revealed by Jesus to have had five husbands, there is no mention of children. This passage is also an unusual choice for our purposes, for feminists have often read this text as one about Jesus' overcoming of boundaries, as he dares to speak to a Samaritan and a woman. While this is an important dimension of the text, I am more interested for our purposes in what this passage reveals to the Samaritan woman about her own navigation and overcoming of boundaries and roles. For, as I shall offer, this story might serve as a parable for those of us caught between the rock of our hearths and homes and the hard place of a truly radical kingdom.

For the earliest hearers of this story, there would have been a familiar ring: a journeying man, a son of Abraham, stops at a well and encounters a strange woman. It is a story already told in Genesis, in the betrothal scenes of Rebekah and Isaac⁵ and of Rachel and Jacob. As is written in Genesis 29: 10b: "Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud." Now one not need be a Freudian to recognize the sexual symbolism within this scene. It is one where a covenant is struck between Jacob and Rachel with the removal of the stone and the gushing forth of the water, symbolizing eros and fecundity (although the fecundity in this case is for Rachel mainly of a vicarious sort). At the very least, the first hearers of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman would have anticipated an encounter between a man and woman at a well to have something to do with sexual union, and hence, propagation. And yet, the union between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is of a different order, as the blessing that she is given is not a son, but a calling and a mission.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask to drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and flocks drank from it?" (John 4:7-12)

Jesus offers something other than the kind of union that one would expect at the well. The living water is of a spiritual, rather than a bodily kind. It takes a while for the Samaritan woman to understand. She mistakes Jesus' talk of living water for water from a live source, as opposed to standing water. Confused, she resorts to a rather nationalistic kind of challenge to Christ. The well of Jacob was of

⁵ See 24: 10-21.

great importance to the Samaritans: Jacob was a kind of national hero to them. One of the visible signs of discord between the Jews and the Samaritans was their fractured worship: the Samaritans worshipped at Jacob's well in Gerizim, the Jews in Jerusalem.⁶ Jesus' claims to know a true source other than Jacob's well for replenishment came as an affront to the Samaritan woman, for Jesus would seem to be usurping the very tangible ties that bind her still within her community.

Jesus again interrupts the woman's social ties even later in the dialogue; this time, it is not her national identity, but her familial one that is addressed:

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one that you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

Jesus encounters the woman precisely within the very complexity of her embodied life; yet he neither rebukes nor rejects her for them. And it is here, within this intimate encounter — it is through the very moment where she is addressed in all her messy and entangled embodiment — that the Samaritan woman *recognizes* who Jesus is, and hence *leaves behind her water jug* and is compelled to return *to her own people*, proclaiming: (v. 29) "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

What does the story of the woman of Samaria have to teach us about motherhood? Nothing within the story tells us that she even is a mother, and yet, she is a woman with whom Christian mothers can relate. An outsider, both as a woman and as Samaritan, her identity is even further confused as she encounters this Jewish rabbi who dares to speak to her. She comes to a well at the height of the sun's heat to fulfill her traditional role: one of sustenance of her household, and there she encounters a man. One would anticipate that her maternal identity shall now become a *fait*

⁶ Judith Gundry-Volf, "Spirit, Mercy and the Other," *Theology Today* (51:4) January 1995, p.512.

accompli, and yet, she is offered something radically different by this stranger — no gendered demands, but a reversal, indeed a *subversion* of her prescribed role as nurturer: v. 15 “Sir — give to me this water that I may drink and never be thirsty or have to keep coming back to draw water.”

What this story may demonstrate is that the goal and destination of Christian women in the new covenant is no longer bound inexorably to our biological roles, and yet this does not render our natural ties inconsequential, for it is *through* them that God encounters us. It is not through a spiriting away of our relationships, but rather, it is through and within them that we are called, we are upheld, and we are sent. Rowan Williams describes this nuance perfectly as he writes:

If the Church exists, as it does, at an angle to the forms we treat as natural, the temptation is to seek to ignore or abolish these forms; to treat people as though they were not deeply and permanently moulded by their natural and unchosen belonging, to a family or a language group or a political system. But this is manifestly damaging and illusory. The Jesus of the gospels is not a human cipher; any attempt to pretend otherwise simply means that it is not the whole or real person who is bought before God. The persons who are invited in the community of the Kingdom are not “new creations” in the sense of having all their relationships and affiliations cancelled. The question thus becomes how existing patterns of belonging can collaborate with the patterns of the new community, if at all, how the goals and priorities of these existing patterns are to be brought together with the constructive work of the Kingdom, the Body.⁷

Implications

The Christian mother’s work and witness will invariably be to those with whom she is closest, and it will therefore likely involve her in the offices of teaching, pastoral care and worship within her own family. However, such practices are also to be prophetic. Just as the woman leaves the water jug behind and runs out into the city to proclaim the good news, Christian women who are mothers might

⁷ Rowan Williams, “Incarnation and the Renewal of Community,” *On Christian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing) p. 236.

be compelled through their encounter with Christ to talk about him in the most radical and surprising of ways. Such prophecy might not be the Victorian scene of perfect harmonious families, nor even the nouveau utopianism of the family that I seem to encounter, in the stay-at-home, Christian earth mothers; however, in a world of rampant consumerism, and in a world where children's needs are persistently overridden, it may be so too. Yet perhaps Christian mothers' discipleship will be of a less self-confident nature — one that acknowledges human frailty and uncertainty in this entirely daunting task. Like the woman at the well, the Christian mother is called also to be enthusiastic, joyous and, it is to be hoped, occasionally as efficacious. Her witness will mirror the ambiguities of the life that she lives daily as a mother at the threshold of birth and death, of pain and joy, of thirst and replenishment. In short, instead of the attributes commonly proffered by our church and world of what a mother is supposed to be, we have this one: she is a creature endowed even in her creatureliness with an exquisitely high calling. Her calling is nothing short of proclaiming the One who knows (and forgives) "everything she has ever done", and because of this, she is freed from water jug and from the dictums of gender to tell this story through prophetic word and in caring deed to her family and to the world beyond.



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