

# Mothering Qualities

*Recognizing the nurturing and reflective side of Jesus*

By MELISSA MUSICK NUSSBAUM

The Gospel reading for Sunday, August 13 continues a story that begins with Jesus learning that John the Baptist is dead. When Jesus hears the news, he gets in a boat, trying to escape the crowds. But, the crowds follow Jesus along the shore and are waiting for him when he docks. They've brought their sick to him, Jesus, whose "heart was moved with pity for them," (Matthew 14:14) began healing their wounds and illnesses. Soon, it's time for supper and the crowds are hungry. Jesus' disciples want to send them into town to find food, but Jesus says, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves" (14:16). The disciples can only come up with five loaves and two fish. Jesus takes the meager supply, looks up to heaven, blesses the food and breaks the bread. He gives the food to the disciples who distribute it to the large, hungry crowd. There's food for all, with plenty leftover.

We speak of Jesus as priest, prophet and king, as Son of God and Messiah, but this is a story where we must acknowledge him as mother. We can only do that in this story and the one that follows, if we look for the little things, the elements we often overlook. It's there that Jesus as mother is revealed. We usually focus on Jesus feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish or Jesus walking on the water. Let's look at Jesus in the quiet moments, the moments in between, where — weary, grieving, heartsick, haunted by Herod — he tries to find solitude and rest. He needs time to pray. He just, in my words and the words of every mother I know, "needs a minute alone."

He won't get it. Because the work of mothering is not done primarily according to schedule or task, but according to others' need. However high the fever or recent the sur-

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gery or deep the grief, a mother puts aside her needs to tend to the needs of those in her care.

So, Jesus puts aside his response to John's terrible death and turns to the sick and hungry waiting for his help. Jesus' grief and concern must wait. People are hurting. People must be fed.

This is a mother's tale.

Once Jesus has taught the disciples and tended to the crowd, he tries to tend to himself. It's been a long day. After feeding the people, the evangelist writes:

[Jesus] made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

He went up by himself. He was there alone. Every mother who ever tried to use the bathroom or take a bath without an audience knows the sweetness of those words. Jesus must have been so grateful for the chance to be still, to be quiet, no hands reaching out, no voices calling, asking, pleading.

But, mothers know how much goes wrong in the night. Matthew's Gospel tells of how the disciples' boat "was being tossed about by the waves" (14:24). Jesus may still have been praying. I like to think of him getting some much-needed sleep. The account doesn't say, but it does reveal Jesus, once again, as a mother, rising in the

night and going out in the darkness to take care of his flock:

During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. 'It is a ghost,' they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, 'Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.' (14:25-27)

Children are scared in the dark. They see ghosts. They hear noises. They dream of monsters and wake sobbing. The disciples in this story remind me of the children who were, and the grandchildren who are, in my care. The frightened cries, the confusion and the calm that comes only when these little ones hear the known and trusted voice: "Don't cry. I'm right here."

Jesus comes walking on the water. I come walking down the hall, earthbound and feeling my way, stumbling in the dark. Still, Jesus' words are a mother's words. They are my words, "Don't be afraid, sweetie. Mama's here. Ma-Maw's here."

Peter wants to be sure that the figure on the water, in the darkness, is Jesus and not a ghost. He says:

'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him. (14:28-31)

Watching out for children in the water, catching children when they fall, holding them up when they sink — this is a mother's work. It is the work of Jesus, our mother.

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