

I will be the first to admit that we all, meaning my sisters and I, like to give my mom a lot of grief. Like...a lot. Our best family stories are usually those which feature one or more of her antics. If you want the latest, and possibly the best one, in a long line of Shirl stories, ask me sometime about how my mother ended up on the very much wrong ride at Disney World and then settle in for a good laugh. And my mom will admit, she gives us all a run for our money, she doesn't always make life easy, and she can be a handful. We tell her this is why she had three kids because we needed to make sure we had her totally covered in terms of keeping track of her.

Yet, here's the thing about my mom. She's also one of the best women I know. I told her the other day that I was having this conversation with someone who also knows my mom, and they commented that my mom is one of the most amazing women she's ever met, strong and fierce and just straight up awesome. When I told my mom this she just incredulously let out, "Really?" And I affirmed to her that yes, she is amazing, that we all see her that way, but she refused to recognize it. So, in a last ditch effort to get her to see how we see her, I pointed her towards the three of us, how much the three women we have grown up to be are emblematic of the woman my mom is, the woman we witness every day of our lives walk with a fierce fire and an amazing heart.

So I told her...look at Jennifer. Jennifer who in her mid-forties was willing to walk away from a high ranking corporate job in order to follow her call from God, who basically was willing to start her life over practically from scratch because that's what she knew she should do. She knew she could do it, because she watched my mom do the same thing. She watched my mom completely start her life over after she and my dad split up. Watched her find a new, completely foreign job that she ended up not only loving, but being amazing at. Watched her fight for the life she wanted because she knew she had to.

I told her...look at Kristin. Kristin who is one of the best, most dedicated mom's I've ever seen. Kristin who displays day in and day out a fierce independence and an I will tell you exactly what I think attitude that makes her an exquisitely amazing and frustrating person to seek advice from. She's that way because she watched my mom gain a sense of independence that revolutionized her life. She is who she is as a parent because my mom made mistakes and was incredible and every day tried to make herself a better one, still does in fact.

And I told her...look at me. I'm a little weird and a little quirky, and I am stubborn beyond all belief when it comes to things I believe in. I'm that way because as I grew up, I watched my mom embrace a little bit more each

day who she was, who she is. She's not afraid to laugh at herself, to unabashedly be who she is, even if the world judges her for that sometimes. And even when it's not the best trait in the world, I watched my mom be stubborn, in all the best kind of ways, and it taught me that sometimes you have to have a bit more dig your heels in oomph to get things done.

That's my mom in a nutshell. Fierce, independent, quirky, stubborn, maddening, strong, completely amazing. Even if you don't know my mom, you kind of do, because you know me, and I am a huge part of her. Anyone who knows Jennifer or Kristin knows my mom, because they are parts of her too. That's all it takes to figure out who my mom is, take a look at the three girls she raised, and you'll get a pretty clear picture. We're all our own women, and yet who we are are woven together strands of different pieces of who my mom is, who she taught us to be, who she's still growing to be.

I am fully aware that when it comes to God and Mary, we aren't dealing with the same kind of parent/child relationship as the three of us and my mom, but there is something about this moment in Mary's life, these words that pour out of her heart that actually do more to teach us about who God is, than they even teach us about Mary. Somehow, on top of being willing to carry the Son of God, the Messiah, the light of the world, being willing to raise him, nurture him, care for him, Mary also ends up being one

of the people that show us more than anyone else, who God is for us, who God is for the world that God so lovingly created.

Now, I don't want this to seem like some Lutheran side step around celebrating Mary. So let's get this out there too. Mary is one of the fiercest, most amazing women the world has ever seen. She was a kid, like legit probably only thirteen years old, and she was willing to say, yes, I will bear the Messiah. She walked through life by Jesus' side, knowing full well that she was accompanying him most likely towards death, knowing full well that he wasn't fully hers, knowing full well that she was raising her own son to basically hand over to the world and say he's yours. It's incomprehensible the strength and tenacity that she possesses. So no, I'm not trying to bypass Mary's awesomeness, I'm actually trying to celebrate it more, because I know I love that I get to show the world a little of who my mom is, and I can imagine that Mary would find it pretty epic that she is helping the world truly see and know who God is.

So...who does Mary tell us God is? God is the God of the forgotten, of the less than, of those the world would describe as unworthy. Mary wasn't anyone special. She was a young girl with, as far as we know, few connections. In the society of Ancient Israel, she would have been unbelievably low on the societal ladder. She wasn't robed in fancy clothes

and gaudy jewels. She wasn't someone everyone knew. Yet, she is who God chose. God chose her to bear God's Son. God peeks into the darkest corners of our world, where so many are hiding, where so many think that's the only place they belong, and God shines a light there and says, I found you, come out. I choose you, you are beloved.

God is the God of the lowly, the poor, the oppressed. God didn't chose some high ranking debutante to be Jesus' mom. God chose a simple girl who identifies herself as poor. Who recognizes in God's choosing of her that God has shown God's partiality for those who have next to nothing. God doesn't come in some massive display of wealth and excess. God comes in simplicity, in poverty, in emptiness and pours God's blessings into those spaces that the world has deemed barren, empty, useless, a waste. It would have made sense for God to choose a queen or some wealthy somebody for Jesus' birth, because that would bring him a life of comfort, safety, and security, but instead, God chose Mary, trusting that her gentleness, her love, her compassion were what he needed more than anything else.

God is the God of abundance, even when it seems that there is nothing left, nothing to even begin with. Mary sees in her relationship with God, a God who fills the hungry with good things, a God who looks into those

places that are longing for fulfillment and breathes abundance into empty spaces. God provides...for all, not just those that the world thinks should be cared for, but for each and every one of God's children. God seeks to fill us spiritually and physically so that we have the strength to be bearers of Christ in the world.

Ultimately, God is the God who loves humanity. Humanity in all of its messy, wild, weird, complicated forms, that is who God loves. Mary wasn't perfect, I mean, I get that we kind of think she was, but she wasn't. She was human like the rest of us, with quirks and hang-ups and foibles and frustrations. But she also was someone who was willing to say yes to faith, to dare to believe that God can do wondrous things, and that was enough, that was all she needed to be, someone willing to go out on a limb in the trust that God was going to be her protector, her provider, her caregiver, her shepherd, her hope, and ultimately...her son.

So...what does that tell us? It tells us that if we feel like that unworthy, lost, lonely, forgotten nobody, hidden in a corner where no one can notice us...God is your God. God will find you and never stop choosing you. It tells us that if you think you need to be something bigger, better, stronger, wealthier, more put together in order for God to love us, well then we need to pitch that thought right out of our heads, because God loves us

exactly as we are, no matter what, no need to change one single thing. There is not meter on God's love, like it will cross some miraculous super love threshold when we get our act together. God just loves us straight up because that's who God is. It tells us that if you are longing, hungering, thirsting, God will find a means to fill you. God is there in the empty spaces pouring God's self out to make us whole.

What this also tells us is that if we want to know who God is, what God is like, we need look no further than ourselves. Just like I can see my mom in me, we can see God in ourselves, not in some holier than though, I'm the king of the world sort of way, but in the way that sees our cracks and imperfections as holy. In the way that sees the very air we breathe as the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the way that whenever we feel love or grace or forgiveness or hope it is a gentle, or sometimes jarring, reminder that God is moving in the world in ways that we don't always anticipate. In the way that something as simple as food to eat, a hand to hold, a laugh shared is a moment of divinity. In the way that says you don't have to be perfect to be precious. You want to know what God is like? Look in the mirror. God is wrinkly and has laugh lines and scrapes and sore muscles and a heart capable of being broken or healed. God is in us. God is in all of us. And that is a miracle. That is...in a word...magnificent. **AMEN!!!**