

Woman, Here Is Your Son... Son Here is Your Mother

John 19: 25 - 27

*** Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

*** (blank) We are once again entering holy ground, as we consider the third of the final words that Jesus spoke from the Cross. In these moments of terrible agony, as Jesus bore not only the physical pain of this barbaric form of execution, we know that he carried with him as well the emotional pain of having been rejected by his followers, being set up for failure in a travesty of a trial, betrayed and denied by those closest to him... knowing also that in some mysterious, holy, and awesome way he was carrying the weight of the sin of the world on that Cross ... (something that I don't think in this life we can ever completely appreciate)... but in all that pain, all that anguish... what an amazing thing to see that the first three statements that Jesus makes are statements of love, compassion, grace, and caring.*

*** "Father, forgive them... they don't know what they are doing..."*

*** "Today, you will be with me in Paradise!"*

*** And today's... "Woman, here is your son ... Son, here is your mother."*

*** Mary is by now a middle-aged woman, probably in her early fifties. More than thirty years had passed since that wonderful day when the angel Gabriel told her that she would be the mother of the Messiah. It is likely that she has been a widow for a number of years. She needed to have someone to look after her. As the oldest son, the responsibility for that would have fallen on Jesus. It was up to him to provide care for his parents in their latter years – this was a basic understanding of the meaning of the 4th commandment ("Honor your father and your mother.")*

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Some have pointed out that it is possible that Jesus did not want his mother to see him die, because the wording of the text here can be interpreted to mean that John took Mary home *at that moment*, and several hours were to pass before Jesus would expire. Either way, in these words we see something of Jesus' loving nature. We see him again, thinking about others more than himself... faithful to who he was to the very end.

Throughout the ages this tender scene at the Cross, this family-focused interaction has struck a chord in the hearts of Christians from East to West. Knowing, as we do, that it was not the spikes that held Jesus on that Cross, but instead, it was the boundless love of God... we are moved to contemplate (to use the phrase from two weeks ago) that 'we are among the *them's*' whose forgiveness Jesus prayed for! To see Jesus here doing something of such importance, at such great cost, and all for us, moves our hearts... but then to consider that his own mother stood by watching this, to imagine the heartache of seeing her son die (and for too many, this is an experience that is all too real) ... makes the picture even more vivid to us.

Compared to the Church in the East, Western hymns on the theme of Mary's sorrow at the sufferings of Jesus are few in number, with the one notable exception being the popular *Stabat Mater*, a hymn that I found very moving the first time I sang it – which was at the Community Good Friday service at Trinity Episcopal Church. It is not in our UM Hymnal, but it has inspired many since it was first sung in the 14th century.

Composed in Latin (in three-line segments) the hymn establishes its theme in the first of its nineteen stanzas: (*Stabat Mater dolorosa/ Juxta crucem lacrimosa/ Dum pendebat Filius*), commonly paraphrased as

** "At the cross her station keeping
Stood the mournful mother weeping

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Close to Jesus to the last.”

Through the subsequent stanzas the hymn keeps repeating that same theme, meditating on the sword that Simeon predicted would pierce the heart of Mary and so forth. The hymn then speaks to Mary herself,

* * “Let me share with thee his pain
Who for all my sins was slain
Who for me in torments died.”

As though to identify its singers with that beloved disciple who stood beside her at the cross, the hymn addresses Mary throughout as "mother." The maternal relationship between Jesus and Mary has touched the hearts of many of the faithful for centuries, as believers have put themselves emotionally in John's place, and Mary's place.

I have heard many messages on this word, and most of them, if I recall correctly, tended to center on the importance of our human family relationships, especially in times of grief, pain, and hardship. [Although, I talked to Pastor HY this week, when I was almost finished this message, and she told me that she actually came to the same conclusion about this passage that I did. I was there, but I didn't remember that message; at least, I didn't think so!]. . . . And that perspective [i.e., family], of course, is a legitimate connection to us from this scene; God has placed great importance and significance into our family relationships.

** (Blank) But I also know that those kinds of thoughts are difficult to bear for many. I know that over my years, I've heard many heartwarming stories about the parents – mothers and fathers – of people from this faith community. I know that many of you were truly blessed to have been raised by Godly, faithful parents. I know also (because I've seen you in action!) that there are so many here, whose children are growing up and will have those same kinds of stories to share about... you! I've seen the sacrifices that again, so many of you have made - and are still making

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- in order to 'honor your fathers and mothers' yourselves. Truly, as the hymn writer said, "Happy the Home When God is There!" Amen?

But, you know, there are, sadly, many others, who don't have memories like that. There are people among us in this room who, due to death, have no memories of parents, or families at all. There are those as well whose parents were not just less than "perfect" (because none of us are perfect!) but who were abusive in so many ways ... there are many whose parents were simply absent - either emotionally unavailable, or those who physically abandoned their families. There are parents who – for whatever reason – were unable to show love, or speak about love, or who disappointed you in ways that are hard to forget.

And there are children who have done the same things to their parents - to some of you - causing so much grief, and second guessing... that you are constantly wondering, "What did I do wrong?" (Even though the answer to that question may well be 'Nothing at all!') I'm telling you what you already know: there are people in this community who have little or no personal experience of a 'happy family', of a 'normal' home life.

So my question is, "Does this word of Jesus from the Cross have anything to say to those among us in this community today who will never have a memory, or an experience of what one might consider an 'idyllic', or 'normal' family?" And I think that the answer to that question is "Yes, it absolutely does." Because there is more going on here than *simply* Jesus doing his 4th Commandment "duty".

** Let us jump back quickly to another scene near the beginning of John's Gospel; namely, the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-12). These two portrayals – this wedding and Jesus' word to

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Mary and John, are both stories that are found only in John's Gospel, but they have several interesting things in common.

- *First*, Mary does not appear in John's Gospel outside of these two places. So these are the only two places that Mary is mentioned.
- But *Second*, interestingly, in both places she is called only "the mother of Jesus" and never named.
- *Third*, in each instance Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman" (*gyne*). Which is not disrespectful, as it might appear to us in English, but does put some 'distance' between himself and Mary, it is a formal means of address.
- *Fourth* – and this is what I want to examine with you today – in both of these accounts, we see the formation of a "*new family*"— in the first scene the new family is formed by the wedding itself (and Mary is in the middle of this), and in the second scene a new family is formed by a kind of adoption, in which the beloved disciple, John, "took her to his own home."¹

I think that there is some great symbolism here. Here's another question for you: why did Jesus 'assign' Mary's care to John, instead of trusting his brothers or sisters to take that responsibility?

** [Matthew 23: 55 - 56

"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

¹ See a fascinating article by *Patrick Henry Reardon*, a senior editor of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (www.touchstonemag.com). Copyright © 2004 by the author or Christianity Today/Christian History & Biography magazine.

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And when we think about the other women who were there with his mother at the Cross, we see that one of them was also named “Mary” the wife of “Clopas”. Clopas, according to some ancient traditions, was the brother of Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father (who as I said, was likely no longer living.) This would make Jesus’ mother, the sister-in-law of this Mary. With a relationship that was close enough that she was there in Mary’s time of grief and need, one might conclude that there was a deep relationship going on here between those two, and even that Clopas had become a care-giver to Mary after the death of his brother, Joseph. It’s kind of the way things worked back then, and that makes sense.

There’s just so much of this that we can’t know with any certainty, but the point I’m raising is that there were already established channels in place with regard to the physical care of Mary, Jesus’ mother. On the other hand, truly, there was a rift among Jesus’ siblings

**** Mark 3:21**

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

****Or, John 7:5**

For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Now we know that this all was going to change in short order! After Jesus’ Resurrection, not only did Jesus’ step- brothers come to believe, but they became leaders in the early church. One of them (James) is the author of one of our New Testament books. So, again, unless we are assuming that Jesus had no fore-knowledge of that happening, and also assume that their lack of belief in Jesus was a reason for them to ignore their care for their own mother (which is hard to picture) ... why then, is Jesus connecting these two unrelated people together? I think the answer to that question is one that has a profound implication regarding who we are here today.

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It has been said that Mary in many ways represents the 'ideal' Christian in the Scripture... i.e. her faith that God would make everything right no matter what was happening, her complete submission to God's will - especially when that will ended up drastically changing her life, exposing her and her family to shame, sorrow, and trouble...she is the 'prototypical' Christian.

It is possible then, that Mary here is again representing the Church? Even in the way Jesus refers to her (with the formal 'woman' instead of the more personal 'mother', or even by her name)

Jesus is gently reminding her that what he is doing on this Cross was for *her*, too. That from this moment on she would relate to Jesus, not as a son, but as the Savior that she needed as much as the rest of us.

But, at the same time, he is showing her that she will never be alone. She may (or may not) have had someone to take care of her physical needs. But Jesus knew that more than that, she also needed someone to lean upon who shared her faith... she needed someone who could and would nourish her spirit, someone who understood what at that point very few understood: that

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Mary... and Mary, Clopas' wife, and John, the 'disciple that Jesus loved' ...they needed a community. And whether in fact, or symbolically, we are witnessing here the birth of a 'new family'... the birth of the Church, the community of faith.

** I've wondered in the past, if, considering those things that I've already mentioned - Mary's immediate and extended family relationships and so forth, I've often wondered if this word from the Cross could have been for the benefit of *John* just as much as it was for Mary?

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John was special in Jesus' eyes - he is one of the 'inner circle' of disciples that Jesus spent extra time with. He is referred to a number of times as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". Now, we know that he loved all the disciples, but we get from this that John was close to Jesus' heart, he was a special friend.

Now, we know very little about any family that John might have still had at that moment, but, like Mary he likely *had* family too. John was a son of Zebedee and his older brother James, was also one of the 12 Apostles. Beside that, James and John were actually cousins of Jesus (their mother, Salome, was Mary's sister.) Now that's kind of complex, but it makes the same point that I was trying to establish about Mary - there was a network of people already in place to take care of them all . They had biological families - even if they were less than perfect, they were there.

But Jesus recognized that there is another level of connection *that we all need*. And perhaps here, in one of his last acts on earth, he was making sure that this connection would be secure: that both Mary and John ... and all those who would come after them, would have someone to nurture them spiritually. To take care of them, to listen to their hopes and fears, to laugh with them and cry with them; to support them in the part of their life that mattered *even more* than their earthly agendas - Jesus' instruction to John was for Mary's benefit, and for John's benefit... and for yours and mine. It was addressing the ever so important issue: *who will care for your soul?* Because that is just not something that we can do very well on our own!

** You know, every time we have a baptism in this church, I, or HeyYoung, will question the parents about their intentions, and about their personal faith. This comes after Pastor HeyYoung has met with each couple and has discussed the meaning of this sacrament with them, and the meaning of the vows that they will make for themselves, or on behalf of their child.

After the actual baptism, I will step out and ask you - "Do you reaffirm the vows that you made, or were made in your name at your baptism?" And you say, "We do!" Then I ask... and

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*** "Will you continue to nurture each other in the Christian life and faith, and include these persons before you in your care?"*

You have always answered "We will!" You *will*! What I'm trying to say here today, is that this statement of Jesus from the Cross is very similar to those Baptism promises. I could just as well hold up that newly baptized baby and say, "Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers... here is your new baby!"... and to that little one.... "Precious child, look around you ... this is your family!"

Do you understand this? What does it mean to take the responsibility to nurture one another in the Christian faith and life? That's a big question, but in general terms, doesn't it mean that we will participate, we will support, we will learn, we will share with others what we've learned? Doesn't it mean that we will commit to 'be there' for each other - even when people do irrational things, or when our broken human nature shows up in some action that upsets us? We forgive, we teach, we are patient... doesn't it mean that we take the responsibility to make sure that the parts of a total 'nurturing experience' that we can't personally do, that we make arrangements to be sure that it is happening?

So, we support the budget so that we can have supplies, and staff for education and youth work, we support the facilities so that we can have choirs for our kids (and adults) - another place to experience community. We pay for a mortgage (even though that's not terribly exciting now that we're in the 10th year of it) - but wow, that mortgage has enabled us to have a facility that is beautiful, and inviting, and welcoming. And open to to greater community.

We teach SS, and volunteer in Youth ministries, we sing in choirs, and play in bands, we weed the gardens and trim the bushes, we work on Missions programs to extend our reach beyond Moorestown, we organize and attend mission trips... do you see? This is what it means to be the New Community. This is all part of "nurturing one another in the Christian faith and life..."

Because we can't walk this journey alone. We were never meant to...

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** I was thinking about this passage, and praying about it last Monday as I was walking through the Brendan T. Byrne state forest (which I still call "Lebanon). If you remember, last Monday it snowed, and there was even more snow out there than here in town - about six inches. But I have to admit, it was very peaceful and beautiful. Here's a picture that I took on the trail.

But anyway, I was praying about this passage as I walked, and picturing in my mind the beginning of the New Community at the Cross and how important that would be. I stated thinking about some of what I've learned in my 20 years here - how important this community has been to me and Dianna... the deep impact that you have had on our children, and just on *me* specifically.

I never had an experience of community like I've had here. You will be the 'model' in my mind going forward of what this is all supposed to look like. Which is not to say that 'we've arrived at perfection'. We haven't. There are still too many people who are tenuously linked to this community - you hang out on the edges. I say this in love, because I don't want the Enemy to snatch you away.

These connections, these small groups, the caring ministry, getting connected - it's so important! We share a perspective on the world as Christians that needs to be tested and nurtured, strengthened, questioned, and stretched by other believers, or we can become simply swallowed up by the world.

So, I'm walking in the snow... silent... letting this all sink in, and praying for a way to 'wrap this up', some illustration, some mental image that would allow us to picture the point I'm trying to make. And I found one... right on the trail.

** In front of me, I saw an animal standing on the edge of the trail. I took a picture, but it's pretty well hidden. I thought it was a dog at first, then I wondered if it might be a big fox... but when my dog ran ahead (before I could stop her) I realized that it was a deer. A young, baby deer.

** It tried to run off the trail, and it stumbled into the woods, just off the trail. (My dog didn't do anything to it, by the way, just sniffed.) When I walked up to it, it was trying to hide by burying

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its face in the snow. I really couldn't tell if it was sick, or injured, or if it was simply a new born and the mother was nearby... I had no idea.

But here's what came into my heart... I felt really bad for this little thing. For all I knew it could have been dying, but I was helpless to do anything about it. I couldn't carry it anywhere, couldn't feed it, couldn't warm it up... it was totally alone. And I thought, "It's just not good to be alone."

I know that many of you are feeling compassionate about this deer... so let me ask you, because this is what God kind of put in my head on that trail... "Do you feel the same compassion for those 'stray's out there who are spiritually lost, who are hungry, and cold, and confused ... and alone?"

** That's why we're here! It's not just for us. Not just to have a place where we can rejoice, and connect, and be comfortable... but it is for ... *them*. The strays who need a spiritual home.

Look around ... today, and when you leave here... look around. Look at the kids. Look at the youth, look at the older folk, the harried parents... the singles... and the single parents... think about all those who are still 'out there' who need hope... And think about this..

Behold... your mother, your father ... behold your sons... your daughters.... **amen**