

**“Woman, behold your son...Behold your mother.”  
(The Seven Last Words of Jesus: The Third Word)**

John 19:25-27; 1 John 4:7-12

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Third Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2016]

I

*“Jesus said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’  
Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’”*

The Third Word from the cross comes in the middle of John’s account of the crucifixion.

We must note at the outset that the picture John paints is quite different from the one portrayed in the three synoptic gospels,  
Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In John there is no Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross—  
Jesus carries his own cross.

There is no taunting crowd.

There is no conversation with two criminals, as in Luke.

There is no cry of despair—  
*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*—  
as in Matthew and Mark (next Sunday’s sermon).

There is no darkness,  
no earthquake,  
no rending of the temple veil, as in Matthew.

There is no indication of how long Jesus was on the cross.

In the other three gospels the disciples all flee,  
and Jesus is left alone to die.

In John’s gospel, Jesus is not alone.

A group of those closest to him is present at the foot of the cross.

Depending on the punctuation there are either three or four women present:

Jesus' mother, Mary;  
 her sister, who is not named;  
 Mary, the wife of Clopas, by tradition a sister-in-law;  
 and Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the resurrection.

They are joined by the disciple whom Jesus loved,  
 thought by many to be John, the writer of the gospel.

They are there because of their love for him,  
 even though it would not have been easy to watch him die.

Usually we picture the cross as high and lifted up,  
 towering over the people who were there.

But when you think about it, that does not make a lot of sense.

In a country where wood was scarce, the timbers would not have been large.

Jesus hung on the cross probably not much higher than they were,  
 and they could easily look into his face and hear his whispers as death began  
 to claim him.

So the picture John paints is one of...  
 calm in the midst of the storm,  
 assurance in the midst of chaos and uncertainty,  
 hope in the midst of despair.

## II

In this setting Jesus speaks from the cross for the third time.

Jesus says to his mother, "*Woman, behold your son!*"

Can you feel in your heart what Mary was feeling as she stood at the foot of the cross watching her son die?

There is no harder, more painful, experience in life than the death of a child.

The death of a son or daughter represents the death of future hopes and dreams.

We all expect that at some point in our adult lives we will bury our parents.

Never in our wildest dreams do we anticipate that we will bury a child.

Parents who have lost a child carry that grief with them for the rest of their lives, and they struggle with how to relate to those who have not known such pain.

Like the woman who said:

*“If my parents had died, I’d be an orphan; if my husband had died I’d be a widow. But what do you call a parent whose child has died? Can you tell me what I am?”*

Mary faced that deep sense of helplessness that only those who have faced the death of a child can know.

She could not wipe his brow,  
 she could not ease his pain,  
 she could not remove his suffering,  
 yet she was there!

To Rome he was a criminal,  
 to the Jewish leaders a blasphemer,  
 to the crowd a laughingstock,  
 to the disciples a failure,  
**but to Mary, he was her son!**

And Jesus, even in the midst of his pain and suffering,  
 still was aware of those he loved.

So he turns his head to look at her,  
 and with parched lips,  
 and in a barely audible voice,  
 he makes certain she will be cared for in his absence...

*“Woman, behold your son!”*

## III

Then Jesus turns to the beloved disciple and says,  
*“Behold your mother.”*

John and his brother James were among the first disciples Jesus had called.

They had been fishermen and had been given the nickname, “sons of thunder.”

They were brash,  
                    hot-headed,  
                    and intolerant.

Once when a village had been inhospitable to Jesus,  
    John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the village.

Another time when Jesus and the disciples encountered a man who was casting out  
evil spirits,

    John wanted Jesus to rebuke him,  
            because he was not part of their group of disciples.

James and John were also ambitious.

It was James and John who came to Jesus at the Last Supper and asked for places  
of honor and authority with Jesus in his kingdom.

Maybe the reason John stood near the cross that day was because he was waiting  
for a word from Jesus.

He wanted some guidance as to how to carry on,  
    some instruction on what to do next,  
            an outline of what to expect in the future.

It may be that what John expected and what he got from Jesus were two different  
things.

But that is usually the way it is when we offer ourselves to Jesus to be used in his  
ministry.

And notice also that somehow John was changed in the process.

The “Son of Thunder” became the Apostle of Love,  
 who wrote in his first epistle that we are to love one another as God has  
 loved us,  
 and that everyone who loves knows God and is born of God,  
 for God is love.

Whatever else we might say about John,  
 we notice above all that Jesus had enough confidence in him to give him a  
 great responsibility—  
 the care of his mother.

**“Behold, your son...Behold, your mother.”**

#### IV

So what is Jesus saying to us in this Third Word from the cross?

If you are in the habit, as I am, of being in church on Mother’s Day, there is a  
 pretty good chance you have heard a Mother’s Day sermon preached on these  
 words that went something like this:

- Jesus cared deeply for his mother.
- Jesus was worried about his mother’s future.
- The saying therefore illustrates Jesus’ love for his mother and his  
 dying concern for her welfare.
- Therefore we are to take care of our own mothers.

This interpretation goes as far back as St. Augustine in the fourth century.

And no wonder—Augustine’s mother Monica was a dedicated Christian woman  
 who prayed unceasingly for her son during the wild days of his youth.

But this interpretation does not fit with the theology of John’s gospel.

In all of John’s gospel the mother of Jesus is mentioned only twice—  
 and never by name.

Good Friday was not the first Mother’s Day.

Being nice to and taking care of one’s mother is something every child should do,

but that is not what this Third Word from the cross is about.

Rather, this saying is about the new community that comes into existence by the power of Jesus.

*While the principalities and powers believe they are tearing his family apart,  
Jesus is quietly putting it together again:  
this mother with this son,  
this past with this future.*

*Although his enemies will succeed in killing him,  
he will leave no orphans behind.*

*At the foot of the cross, the mother of the old becomes the mother of the new.*

*The beloved disciple becomes the new beloved son.* (Barbara Brown Taylor)

And notice also what Jesus is **not** saying; he is not saying:

“John, take care of my mother and treat her **as if** she were your own.”

There is no **as if** implied here.

Rather, Jesus says, “*Behold, your son...behold, your mother.*”

The literal meaning is,  
**“This is your son, Mary...  
 this is your mother, John.”**

Jesus speaks a word of command, of proclamation.

He speaks with the same authority expressed when God at the creation said,  
*“Let there be light,”*  
 or when Jesus himself at the table in the Upper Room said,  
*“This is my body.”*

By rewriting the covenant in his own blood,  
 Jesus has done something completely new.

In giving his mother to his disciple, he is causing a new relationship to come into existence that did not exist before.

Mary and John have a symbolic importance—  
they represent the way *family* ties are transcended in the church *by the ties of the Spirit*.

Mary has been called the new Eve in that she becomes the first-born of a new reality,  
of a new family,  
that only God could create.

This helps us understand why Jesus calls his mother “Woman” in the Gospel of John.

While Jesus calling his mother “Woman” seems rude and disrespectful to us, he was actually using a common term of respect.

When Jesus says, “Woman, behold your son,”  
he is setting aside the blood relationship to create a wider family.

A story in the Gospel of Mark makes the same point in a different way.

*“A crowd was sitting around Jesus; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’”* (Mark 3:32-34)

It is not that Jesus has no room for his own family.

It is not that we are to be like the Rev. Nathan Price, the fundamentalist missionary in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, who was so frenzied in his evangelistic efforts with the native Africans that he was oblivious to the suffering of his wife and four daughters.

It is that Jesus is calling his followers into a new relationship with him and with one another.

One biblical commentator goes so far as to say that in the Gospel of John, this text represents the birthday of the church.

When Jesus says, “*Behold your mother...Behold your son,*” something new is created—

a new family is formed from the fractured lives of those who stand before the cross;

a new fellowship is founded...the fellowship of the forgiven;

a new community comes into being through the power of the cross.

## V

But we must take this one step further.

When Jesus says to Mary, “Woman, behold your son,”  
and to John, “Behold your mother,”  
he binds us in a relationship of love and caring with every other person.

From this moment all humankind becomes one family,  
and all are called to care for one another.

But not just in a general way...but in the particular.

Think about it this way:

Before this moment in Jesus’ life,  
before his time on the cross,  
when was he the most helpless and vulnerable?

The answer, of course: when he was an infant.

In Jesus, God chose to come to us in the most helpless form imaginable—  
a baby, utterly and totally dependent on others.

God was dependent on us.

And who cared most for God in this state of helplessness?

Jesus’ mother Mary.

Now helpless again, Jesus cares for her.

At the beginning of his life, Mary helped the infant Jesus.

At the end of his life, the helpless Jesus helps Mary by giving her a new son to care for, John.

He was to care for her, and she was to care for him.

It was like the foot washing all over again,  
     when the disciples were stunned by Jesus' actions,  
     washing their feet as a lowly servant would.

Here he says it again in the most vivid and poignant way—  
     the meaning of faith is to be found in how we care for one another.

Love is to be particular...  
     it must focus on individuals....  
     it must be concrete.

A retired minister was having some concrete poured at his house, and while the concrete was setting some of the neighborhood kids came and carved their initials in it.

The minister came out of the house and angrily shooed the kids away, then went back into the house fusing and fuming.

His wife gently chided him: "Now Honey, you're supposed to love those children."

"I do love them," he replied, "but in the abstract, not in the concrete."

The Jesus kind of love is not abstract,  
     but specific, concrete, and focused on the individual.

It is not enough to be involved in some great cause...  
     the ministry and mission of the church,  
     the search for peace and justice,  
     the effort to feed the hungry.

We are to be involved with particular persons  
who have particular needs,  
or our love will not be authentic.

Sooner or later all talk of love and brotherhood and sisterhood and the kingdom of peace had better be related in the way we live and act at home and in our most intimate relationships.

It was that way for Mary and John.

It must be that way for us as well.

Of John, Jesus says, "Woman, here is your son."

Of Mary, Jesus says, "John, here is your mother."

Of the elderly person dying of loneliness and neglect in some lonely nursing home room,

longing for a loving human touch,

Jesus says, "*Behold your mother...your father!*"

Of that young man struggling with a drug addiction,

needing the hope of liberation and a pathway to sobriety,

Jesus says, "*Behold your brother!*"

Of that single mother struggling to raise her children,

working two or even three jobs to make ends meet,

seeking understanding and concern,

Jesus says, "*Behold your sister!*"

Of that child running the streets of our cities and our world,

unloved, neglected, ill-clothed and poorly fed,

needing friendship, nurture, and acceptance,

Jesus says, "*Behold your child!*"

Of the family whose home was foreclosed on,

now living out of suitcases in a flea-bitten motel room,

Jesus says, "*Behold your family!*"

## VI

A number of years ago the person who was elected to be the moderator of the Presbyterian Church, USA traveled widely, speaking in churches all over the country.

As she traveled people would tell her of their church.

They would tell her about their outstanding pastor,  
point out their wonderful pipe organ or their beautiful stained glass  
windows,  
boast about their budget  
or their program  
or some other feature of their church.

But the most moving comment that church leader ever heard was from a tiny elderly woman who said,

*“When a person joins this church, they never have to bear another burden alone.”*

**“Woman, behold, your son!...Behold, your mother!”**

And from the moment Jesus said that,  
neither you nor I  
nor any other man, woman, or child in this world  
should ever have to bear another burden alone.

Amen.

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