

March 10, 2019

Cross Words: Behold Your Son . . . Behold Your Mother

Rev. Dr. John Ross

John 19:25-27

You'll have a chance to come to the altar at the end of the service. Throughout the season of Lent, we'll offer communion to anyone who would choose to receive it at the end of the service. I'm just giving you that heads-up, and I don't know if anyone else noticed it, but an orange flash flew through the sanctuary during that song, and Mia jumped into the open arms of her father. My worship is complete in that image.

Our Lenten series this year will be centered on the words that Jesus spoke from the cross. Now, a few years ago, if you were hanging around this place, you might recall that we spent the whole season centered on the final week of Jesus' life, one day for each week of Lent. This year we focus on the final words of Jesus, one word for each week. These are the "cross" words of Jesus, taking these sayings of Jesus one at a time. These are the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. First, and we did this on Ash Wednesday: Father Forgive them for they don't know what they are doing. (2) Woman, behold your son, son, John behold your mother. (3) Today you will be with me in Paradise. (4) My God, why have you forsaken me? (5) I thirst. (6) It is finished, and (7) into your hands I commend my Spirit. Those are the seven words of Jesus recorded in Scripture from the cross.

Now, beyond these Sunday mornings, as I mentioned earlier, there are Wednesday classes. There are small groups. There's the art gallery. All this is stitched together, but what I'm going to propose to you matters most is your own personal and private devotion, your own personal and private times of reflection in this season.

Now, we're setting the table with these last words of Jesus because we happen to think that they matter, and they matter for lots of different reasons, but they matter at least for a couple of reasons. Number one, they matter because these are Jesus' last words in his dying hours. You just have to think for yourselves how careful you would be in choosing your words if you knew they were among your last - right? - or on your death bed - right?. You're going to have different or more important words to speak in that moment than you do in just the every-day dribble of conversation. Secondly, Jesus was suffering at the time that he spoke these words. So, a combination of them being his last spoken words and them being in a moment of great suffering, again brings more import. Third, Jesus is the incarnation of God, and, so, if we can better understand Jesus by looking really closely at these particular words, then we have a better shot at understanding God, and, lastly, the Gospel writers have all chosen to include these words in some form or another, not all of them. They're patched together all along the four Gospels, but they chose intentionally for these things to be remembered.

So, we began with Luke's Gospel on Ash Wednesday with a word of forgiveness. Today, we move to John's Gospel where we read the account of Jesus speaking to his own mother and two other women and then one of his disciples. These words that Lindy is about to read come from John's Gospel. So, I'd invite you to give your attention now.

(Lindy reads John 19:25-27.)

Some of you already know this about me, but I am not a fan of made up holidays. These are the holidays that exist primarily for commercial purposes. Some call them Hallmark Holidays – right? – even though Hallmark has a disclaimer that they don't have authority or power to declare any kind of holiday. It's quite convenient, though, isn't it? That they sell ways to celebrate these, like Boss' Day, Employee Appreciation Day, Grandparents' Day, Siblings' Day. There's even a Clergy Appreciation Day. It's in October. Mark your calendars. Well, don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of showing appreciation and expressing love to the important people in my life. I just don't need someone else to tell me when and how to do it, and, in fairness, I'm not really much of a fan of other more legitimate holidays, either. Not a big fan of Valentine's Day. Never have been. Not a huge fan of either Mother's Day or Father's Day, believe it or not and not even all that big a fan of making a big deal out of birthdays, even.

Now, before you judge me as being too much of a great big jerk, let me explain a little bit. I prefer a more organic and a much more sincere and a much more frequent approach to expressing and communicating the celebration of other people, of acknowledging the intrinsic value and importance of other people in our lives. Now, I will say that I do love April Fools' Day. There's a great history behind that. You can read it sometime. We've had a lot of fun round this place over the years on April Fools' Day, like the year that I took hostage every keyboard in the entire building. I thought it was a great idea until the staff all just went home for the day, and said, "Forget it. We can't work." Or, when John Estrem wrapped my car in cellophane. I couldn't even get in.

It just seems to me to be a little bit insincere to have Hallmark or anybody else telling us when to celebrate, honor or remember other people, but there are exceptions to this general rule of my own, anyway, and this past Friday is one exception. International Women's Day is not a Hallmark Holiday – far from it, in fact. There is a purpose behind the day that elevates the occasion toward justice, equality, solidarity. You know, International Women's Day has its roots all the way back to 1909. I don't know if you know this or not. Fifteen thousand women, or so, gathered in New York City to march in favor of equal pay, in favor of labor regulations and in the fight for voting rights, and just two years later, more than eleven million other women joined in the movement, and it became a world-wide movement, and in 1975 the United Nations declared that year to be International Women's Year.

Now this is all well and good, and great progress has been made in 110 years, and there's lots of work yet to be done, but do we need March 8 to know the equal importance and intrinsic value of women in the world? I think not. I need only look around the room. I need only inspect the women in my own life, and I need only look to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to look no further than the love and the life, the teaching and the treatment of women by Jesus, including some of his final words spoken from the cross: Woman, behold your son; John, behold your mother.

Looking at the big picture of Jesus' ministry makes it clear that Jesus did not need Hallmark to tell him when to celebrate the women around him. Counter to all the cultural norms of his day, Jesus regularly displayed concern and compassion for women. Mercy and love. Throughout the Gospels some of the most striking stories have women at the centerpiece, and, as a result, it was women who financially supported his active ministry; it was a woman who anointed Jesus with oil and another who became his

first follower in Samaria; it was a woman who first experienced a risen Christ and testified to the resurrection to all the others, and, as we read today, it was three women who had the courage to stay with him all the way to the cross when most others fled and at least one that we know of publicly denied him. To be sure, Jesus selecting twelve men to be his disciples is problematic to our evolved gender sensibilities, and Paul's restrictive regulations about women in the church no longer apply, but their appreciation of women's commitment, courage and giftedness is clear, again especially in light of current cultural, religious and civic norms of their day.

So, the question that we have to ask and answer is not so much why were there three women at the cross but why did the writers of John's Gospel intentionally choose to include this exchange between these women and a dying Jesus? What does this exchange reveal to us about what those close to Jesus believe mattered to him? Why did these "cross" words matter then, and why do they still matter today?

For me, this is one of the clearest messages of Jesus – that we are all called to care. This is the message that I pull from this thread – that each and every one of us is called to care. Now, I know that that's a very simple and often claimed message of Jesus. We even have an entire ministry that Lindy leads with her great giftedness under the banner of Called to Care, but I'm going to expound on it just briefly for two reasons. Number one, a season of reflection and discernment like the season of Lent is a really good time to just get back to the basics, like we don't have to overwork the message of the Gospel to have a transformational experience in this season. In fact, sometimes it's better to just get back to the bedrock foundation, the basics of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Secondly, in a world with Hallmark Holidays and dates set aside to remind us of the intrinsic value of other people and our need to care for them, apparently we still have a lot of work to do in this regard. So, no matter how well we know it, we're maybe not fully responding to Jesus' call to care for our world. I believe John's Gospel and the others as well provide a blueprint of Jesus' priorities. The "cross" words of Jesus put a fine point on them for us.

So, let's get to it. For whom and to whom are we called to care? I'm going to go in three quick directions, starting first with what is so obvious right on the surface of this text for this morning. We are called to care for anyone who has ever lost a child. There are three Marys at the cross today. Mary Magdalene, Mary wife of Cleophas who was Mary's aunt by marriage and Mary, Jesus' mother. Mary, the mother of Jesus. She's there at the foot of the cross and in that moment experiences the very worst of what life brings many people – the death of a child. Mary is there going through the unimaginable and joining a club that nobody wants to be a member of. She is there, watching, going through suffering so difficult that we don't even have a word for it in our English language. I've pointed this out to you on many occasions in hopes that you'll never forget it, that, number one, when a child loses his or her parents, we call them an orphan. When a spouse loses a spouse, we call them a widow. We literally have no word for those who lose a child, a child at any age, but in a moment of his own unimaginable pain and suffering, Jesus attempts to care for and to comfort his own mother. He says, "Woman, look, behold, see, there's John. He's your son now. He'll take care of you." And then Jesus says, "John, look, behold, see, see my mom, she's your responsibility now. Take care of her." This mattered enough to Jesus that he gives very real, very specific and very assigned responsibilities to each of them, and I believe it's safe for us to assume that we are given equally real, equally specific assigned responsibilities in our work of caring, and I will tell you that in nearly 30 years of full-time ministry, the most difficult

passages of all, without doubt, have been those times when we (Lindy, Danielle, Rustin and I, and others and many of you) sit with parents who suffer the death of a child - Trevor, Billy, Steve, Todd, Ben, Eve, Wade to name just a few.

In his “cross” words to his own mother, Jesus is calling us to give special care for all who lose a child, and in that very same moment, Jesus gives us a broader command and one that is very current and universal for all of us and that is the clear and compelling call to care for our aging parents. This is more than a fulfillment of the fifth commandment to honor thy father and mother. It’s more than that. This is an issue of justice, it’s a matter of kindness and it’s an expression of humility, and if that sounds familiar to you, it’s because that’s “what the Lord requires of us.” I say that caring for our aging parents is a current and universal reality for us for demographic reasons. Many of you know this, but you know of a world of a tsunami of aging members of our society. Baby boomers are coming of retirement age ten thousand people per day, turning 65 years of age for about the last decade and for another whole decade to come. Each and every one of those birthdays is a holiday worth remembering and celebrating, Watching my mother slip away in the long goodbye of Alzheimer’s and now just watching my dad get really old, (“I love you, Pop. Sorry about that.” it just occurs to me that I’m simply asked to do for them what they did for me. That is to care for them and to meet their needs. Jesus was, again, way ahead of his time when he said to the disciple that he loved the most, who of course just happened to be John – he said, “John, my dad is dead, and I’m dying. I need you to take care of my mom.”

As individuals, we have an important responsibility in this regard but so does the whole Church. So does the Church collective. Many of our seniors don’t have children nearby or any children at all. Who’s going to stand in that gap? Who’s going to befriend them? Who’s going to go visit them? Who’s going to celebrate the holidays with them? Who’s going to drive them places? Who’s just going to call them on the phone every Sunday night? The simple things that mean so much. If the Church is listening to Jesus, the Church will do all that and more. Behold our seniors.

And, there is a final call to care that’s embedded in Jesus’ “cross” words and in John’s Gospel and in the whole of the Gospels and that is to care for the full family of God, all of God’s children, and ALL means all. We don’t sing a lot of old hymns at the 9:00 service here, but there’s one that we’re going to sing at the 10:45 later this morning. It’s a hymn written by John Fawcett, an eighteenth century English clergyman. Tradition has it that he served a poor but faithful and really robust little country church outside of London, but on the occasion of a call to a wealthy big church in London and saying goodbye to his little country church, he wrote these words, “Blessed to be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.” And several other verses. Blessed to be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. There’s a funny little debate that breaks out in our worship planning whenever this hymn pops up, and the question is always the same. “Is it ‘Blessed be the ties that bind or blessed be the tie that binds’”? Is it ties singular or tie plural? And we always have to go back and open the hymnal to remember which it is. Do you remember which it is? Is it singular – blessed be the tie – or is it plural – blessed be the ties. It’s singular.

Now, I could make a really good sermonic point with either singular or plural, but today I’m going with singular because that’s what’s in the hymnal, and the tie that binds us is as singular as is Jesus’ call to each of us, to care for the whole family. He is the tie that binds us together as the whole human family,

beloved, blessed and called to care. Now, if that call to care for the whole human family is too vague for you, let me wrap up with a couple of really specific opportunities for you, as specific and real as Jesus was to John at the foot of the cross that day. Let's start with those who are in very real and specific need right now, today. Homeless families. Nine-thousand homeless people last night in Minneapolis, St. Paul and again tonight, but a whole group of families is coming here to Wayzata Community Church today to stay for a whole week. It's going to take 80 to 100 volunteers to get this done, to roll out the red carpet, to care for them, and it doesn't get any easier. All you have to do is walk out that door, go to the table and sign up for a slot. I'm not trying to guilt anybody or anything. I'm just saying this is as easy as it gets to answer the call of Christ to care for all, the whole family, because there will be families here, starting today. Behold. Look. There are families here.

Or teenagers. Some of the most turbulent and trying times in our lives, more so now than ever. Adolescents are dealing with anxiety at unprecedented rates. You know that research shows us time and time again that adolescents need five adults in their lives other than their parents – five other adults as mentors to reach a full state of flourish and development. We have high school, middle school ministries built on relationships that require adults who just love to be with kids. You don't have to be a Bible scholar. You don't have to be a psychology professor. You just have to love kids. You have to be ready and willing to spend a few years with them because, believe it or not, there are kids right here in our church who never hear from an adult in their lives that they are loved just as they are. They hear that they are loved because they're really smart, or they hear that they are loved because they can shoot a puck into a net, or they hear that they are loved because they are a really strong leader, but they very seldom, if ever, hear that they are loved just as they are. That's what we do here. Behold, our students!

Refugees. Jesus himself crossed borders to care for others and cared for those who crossed his border. Now, don't get simple on me. Borders are not limited to national lines on a map, and refugees aren't limited to those from other countries. We have refugees from right here in Wayzata, Minnesota. Anyone who has been told by the church that they aren't welcome because of who they love or how they live or the addiction that oppresses them and the diseases that depress them – anyone held at arm's length from God's love is a refugee, and we get to tell them that there's an inclusive love of Jesus that's ready to wrap them up and love them and care for them. Behold, the stranger!

And, finally, there are those people that we never meet. You know, it's so awesome knowing this community as well as I do now over all these years. I get to see you in your lives outside of this place by the magic of social media, and I see you doing all these amazing things. It's like just in the last twelve hours I've seen some of you jumping into a frozen lake and others of you gathering around tables to raise money for families and schools that have special needs. I mean, I could just go on and on. It's inspiring, and you're serving people that you'll never meet, and that's a good and Godly thing.

There's a family in the life of this church that lost a daughter as an infant, and they have chosen to turn their grief into good and have set up a non-profit with a singular purpose, and that is to provide immediate, practical and financial support to anyone who loses a child so that their work and their grief and their movement through that chapter doesn't have to be delayed by a mortgage that's due or a car payment that's late or a bill that they just can't afford to pay to go see a counselor or go to Faith's Lodge

in Wisconsin or – fill in the blank. This foundation isn't launched yet, but it will be soon, and before long finances will not determine a family's ability to grieve the death of a child. Within and beyond this church and every church is a beautiful world waiting for us. Behold one another!

Well, this example brings us back around a little bit to where we began with Jesus' "cross" words that call us all to care. We don't need a holiday or a special day. We've been called to care every day. We've been called to care for those who lose a child as Mary did. We've been called to care for our aging parents as John did, and we've been called to care for all in our human family as Jesus did. And ALL means all.

Pray with me. Loving and gracious God. As we move into this time of Lent, we ask that you would bless us with moments of margin here and there where we can come to you in humility and look for the ways in which we can serve you by serving others, we can love you by loving others and we can love you, also, by loving ourselves. So, for those of us right now in this room who are in a place of need or who need care, may they have the courage to step forward and receive it, and, for those of us who have the capacity to care, call us and compel us to do just that – to respond to love this world of yours in very real and specific ways. We ask all this in Christ's name. Amen.