

“CROSS WORDS: III – ‘WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON.
SON, HERE IS YOUR MOTHER.’”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
March 8, 2020

Second Sunday of Lent

I John 3:16-19

John 19:25b-27

I called a long-time friend of mine the other day to check on her daughter. I've known this family since 1987, which happens to be the year her daughter was born. Anyway, the reason I was checking on her daughter was that I knew she was due to give birth to twins any day now. By the way, she and her husband also have a set of four year old twin boys!

So, like I said, I called to check in on them, and Cheryl was giving me the latest. That day, which was Tuesday, was her daughter's last day of teaching before her maternity leave, and Cheryl had watched the boys that day. So her daughter got home from school, Cheryl went home, and no sooner had she walked in the door and had barely taken her coat off than the phone rang. It was her daughter in a panic, and all she said was “Mom, get back here fast.”

So Cheryl pulled her coat back on, ran to her car, drove the few miles to her daughter's house as quickly as she could, and discovered when she got there that her daughter had had an accident in the kitchen, had hurt her hand and was bleeding pretty badly.

911 had already been called, but in the meantime there were two little four year old boys to tend to. They were, you won't be surprised to hear, sitting in front of the television watching a video, and completely oblivious to the chaos in the kitchen. So while her daughter's mother-in-law stayed in the kitchen, Cheryl went and talked to the boys.

She calmly told them that Mommy had been hurt and there would be an ambulance coming, but not to worry, they would take care of her. One of the boys started to cry, but soon she had soothed him, and soon enough, they both went back to watching the video. Cheryl said to me, “There's something about me, I'm calm in an emergency, something just takes over.”

Well, the end of the story is that it all ended well. Cheryl went with her daughter to the hospital where her son-in-law met them, the boys were cared for by their other grandmother, a few stitches and a few hours later everybody was back

home where they belonged, and yes, on Friday, the happy couple brought a new daughter and new son into the world!

I told you that story as a witness to the strength of mothers, indeed, to the strength of parents. They have that something, that certain something, that enables them to do the impossible – stay calm in the midst of chaos, and sacrifice whatever it takes to be there for their children.

The ultimate picture of that is in this morning's Gospel lesson, for in it, we see a mother having to be in a place that no mother should ever have to be – watching her child dying a horrible death on a cross in front of a jeering crowd. No one would have questioned her had she decided she couldn't be there watching that horror. No one would have thought any less of her.

Yet she was there. When so many others had left Jesus in the lurch, including almost all of his disciples, Mary was there. When it would have been so much easier on her to have said her goodbyes earlier, yet she was there. Mary was there. Hers is the very picture of "I would do anything for my son. I will be calm in the midst of this chaos, for my son, even though my heart is breaking in two."

Mary wasn't alone, she had two other women with her – his sister in law Mary, who was Joseph's brother's wife, and Mary Magdalene. Surely they were doing all they could to comfort her, but nothing really could.

And then there was John, the one person from Jesus' inner circle who stayed.

Jesus, in all his agony, saw them there. He saw the sadness and grief etched on their faces, especially his mother's. He had to have been worried for her, not just for what she was going through, but for what might lay ahead. With him gone, she would be alone and vulnerable – and that surely pained him.

So with some of his last breaths on that cruel cross, he uttered this third word. Looking from his mother to John and then back to his mother he said, "Woman, behold your son." And then looking to John again, he said to him, "Son, behold your mother."

As one pastor so beautifully put it, "It was Jesus' last way of saying to Mary, 'I love you.'" (On-line, "The Seven Last Words from the Cross," Pablo Martinez)

In saying those words, Jesus was giving the care of his dear mother over to John, and assuring his mother that John would be like a son to her now. She would not be alone.

Clearly, this third word from the cross holds deep meaning for all of us as well as for the two of them on that day long ago. Clearly, Jesus was living out his commitment to the fifth commandment – “Honor thy father and thy mother,” which, of course, is a call to us today just as much as it has been for the ages.

We are called to care for those who have so cared for us throughout our lives, our parents, in whatever ways we can.

But it’s even bigger than that, because, as children of God and followers of Christ, we know that all people are our brothers and sisters. Which means, as Adam Hamilton writes in a sermon on this word, that “Jesus’ words to ‘Behold your son,’ and ‘Behold your mother,’ remind us that this mission is ours, as well – caring for those Jesus cares for as if they are our own family.” (Adam Hamilton, *Final Words*, p. 62)

Indeed, this third word from the cross is one of only two of them which calls for a response from his followers – from us. The first word, his word of forgiveness, certainly asks us to be forgiving as well. And then, this one, calling us to care for those whom he loves. To the very end, Jesus is inviting his followers to be people who love and care for others – all others – not just family. Actually, to begin to see all people as your family.

I will never ever forget reading a story that former CNN reporter Peter Arnott told a long time ago. He was in Israel, in a small town on the West Bank, when an explosion went off. Many people were hit, and he said bodies were everywhere. Wounded people were screaming from every direction.

All of a sudden a man came running up to him carrying the bloodied body of a little girl in his arms. He pleaded with Peter to help get her to a hospital. He could see that he was part of the press corps and that was his only chance of getting her to help. No one else was being allowed through.

So Peter put them in his car and drove in the direction of the hospital. All the while the man pleaded with him to go faster because she was failing. When they got to the hospital, the girl was rushed into the emergency room, and the two men retreated to the waiting room to wait. After a short while, a doctor came out and told them solemnly that she had passed away.

The man collapsed his tears and Peter put his arms around him to comfort him. He said, “I don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine what you’re going through. I’ve never lost a child.” At that, the man looked up at Peter in a startled manner and said, “Oh, mister. That Palestinian girl was not my daughter. I’m an Israeli settler. That Palestinian is not my child. But, mister . . . There comes a time when each of us must realize that every child, regardless of that child’s background, is a

daughter or a son. There must come a time when we realize that we are all family.” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 121)

He was right, and I think that was Jesus’ message from the cross in this word. We are all family, called to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable.

Which leads me to another story – the story of a teacher by the name of Roger, whom I heard about from Adam Hamilton. Roger is an elementary school teacher in Kansas. One night, years ago, Roger was working late, so he left the school building way after dark had descended. As he was leaving, he noticed one of his students swinging on the playground by himself. He went to him and asked why he was there by himself after dark on a school night, and the boy, named Jonathan told him that his mother had left the family, and his father worked all night, so there was no one to care for him. Well, Roger tried to reassure Jonathan that everything would work out, everything would be okay, and he sent him on home.

After that, Roger kept an eye out for Jonathan. Within the year, he was placed in foster care as his father was unable to care for him. He was briefly reunited with his father, but knowing he couldn’t care for him, the father asked Roger if he would take his son in. Roger agreed and welcomed Jonathan as if he were his own.

Hamilton goes on to tell how Jonathan thrived in that environment, and went on to attend Stanford University, got to travel the world, fell in love with a beautiful girl and together they went on a mission to South Africa, before returning to the states and setting up life in Chicago, where he works with inner-city boys who have no place to call home themselves.

And here’s the kicker. Jonathan is now Adam Hamilton’s son-in-law. He is married to Adam’s daughter Danielle. Listen to Adam’s words: “From the day Danielle was born, I began to pray for the boy who one day would be her husband. Little did I know I was praying for a little boy whose troubled life would find stability and joy and a future with hope because of the love of a teacher who faith compelled him to see this child as his own. How grateful I am that Roger had heard the words spoken from the cross, ‘Behold your son.’” (Hamilton, p. 58)

Oh dear friends, those two stories illustrate so perfectly answering Jesus’ call from the cross, to love and care for those whom he loves and cares. It’s a tall order, indeed, because there is so much need in the world, so many who are vulnerable, so many the world ignores.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has said of this moment in Jesus life: “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.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, “Mother of the New,” p. 99)

Which leads me to one final story. One day a man came home from work exhausted, only to come upon his young son who wanted to play. The man was so tired he just wanted to lay down and take a nap on the couch, but the boy didn’t want to hear it. He was persistent. So finally the dad had an idea. He flipped through a magazine they had gotten at church, and found a picture of the globe in it. He tore the page out of the magazine, then tore the picture of the globe into pieces, and then said to the young boy, “Here, this is like a puzzle. Put the globe back together again.” He figured that would take the boy a goodly amount of time, which would enable him to get some shut-eye.

Surprisingly, not too much later, the little boy tapped his almost-asleep father on the shoulder and said, “I’m done.” “You’re done?” his dad said. “How can you be done so fast?” To which the boy replied, “It was easy. I turned the pieces over and they were pictures of Jesus, so I put Jesus together, and when I did, I turned it back over and the world was back in one piece.”

Well, that says it all. As Barbara Brown Taylor said, the powers and principalities of the world will do their best to separate us and wound us, but Jesus can put us back in one piece. And he’ll do that through us, as we care for each other, as we look on one another as brothers and sisters in him, and take care of those who are vulnerable.

May we have eyes to see the ones who need us, and hearts to care for them with the love of Christ. May it be so.

Amen.