

Meditation on the Third Word

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April 22, 2011 + Good Friday

“Woman, behold your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26-27)

Most of them had fled. It was over. All the hopes and dreams, the journey of three years they had been walking with Jesus, everything was finished – and more disastrously than they could have imagined. As always, for any of us, the unthinkable isn't really within the realm of possibility, until it happens. Then the questions begin, “How could this happen?” “Why didn't I see this coming?” “What evidence did I ignore?” “How could I have stopped it?” “How could I be so wrong?” “Was I?” “Was I completely mistaken, misled in my belief?” There had been clear warnings about what was coming, many from Jesus himself. But again, it is human nature not to hear what we don't want to hear, what we can't make sense of, what doesn't fit into the world as we know it and want it to be. In this day and age, no doubt, someone would quickly assemble a team to launch an investigation, to examine every word, every step, to figure out how they missed it. How they could have been so wrong, so unsuspecting?

But for now, at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, his followers fell into two camps: The first camp, those who fled, driven by fear, the overwhelming fear. “What will this mean for me now?” “If they've crucified Jesus, are they going to come after me?” “I've got to get out of here.” Peter's already experienced the shame and sorrow of realizing – notwithstanding his fervent assertion that he would go to prison, indeed, he would die for Jesus – that when he was actually pointed at, in the wake of Jesus' arrest, three times by people who recognized him as a follower of Jesus, he denied even knowing him. He wept bitterly when he realized what he had done. Yet where is he now? He's not mentioned as one at the foot of the cross. I tell my students all the time, in bible class, in ethics class, in character education class, that none of us really knows what we will do in any given situation, until we are actually in it. We may feel fervently and certain about something – but until confronted, for real, with a decision, where there are serious consequences to standing up for what we say we believe in, we simply don't know how we will choose. We can't judge harshly someone else's failure. And then there is the second camp, those who remained, at the foot of the cross, mostly the women closest to Jesus, and his “beloved disciple.” Compelled by their love, loyalty, grief, broken hearts, who knows - they remained. If they felt any fear at all, it didn't really matter. They weren't concerned about themselves, their safety. Their world had been shattered.

Jesus, on the cross, near the end, abandoned by most of his followers, where were those adoring crowds? Maybe there were some curious onlookers; he had to have been in excruciating pain. His closest disciples had fled; one of them had actually betrayed him, turned him over, and this was the result. Who remains? Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene and someone described as “the disciple whom he loved”. What a comfort it must have been to Jesus to see their familiar faces, to not be utterly alone, totally abandoned in his anguish. The women had not deserted him. I ask you, hard as it is to even get the words out, what mother could bear to leave? What mother could bear to stay? And the one described as “the disciple whom he loved,” standing near his mother. How faithful they were. They were still here, this small group, even if the others had fled.

Jesus, even dying on the cross, was concerned about what would happen to his mother. What would become of her? This was a time and a place when a woman alone was extremely vulnerable. There still are such places. And as his last willed act, Jesus, a dying child, in great pain, arranged for the care of his mother. Surely he knew that the life he had led must have been very difficult for his mother and now it had led to this. He had not been around much once his itinerant life of teaching and healing began. He was out doing the work of God his Father, and his mother understood that. Mary, his mother, really doesn't figure in the story much after her famously commemorated role in humbly and obediently accepting the news, the extraordinary call – the gift – that she would bear the Son of God in her womb, responding to the Angel Gabriel with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (*Luke 1:38*) I wonder if she was remembering that encounter, those words, here at the foot of the cross, how the angel had greeted her with the words, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (*Luke 1:28, 30*) Interestingly, John's Gospel, from which these last words of Jesus come, does not even include a birth story in his telling of Jesus' life. He begins, rather, with the very poetic and powerful, “In the beginning was the Word . . .” (*John 1:1*) Did she remember the words that spilled out of her mouth when she, pregnant with Jesus, went to visit her relative Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, the words of the *Magnificat* in Luke's Gospel (*Luke 1:46-55*), words that have been sung and have soared in this space over and over again: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” [Does she remember those exuberant words, that spirit rejoicing in God my Savior? Is this what being looked on with favor looks like, as she stands at the foot of the cross?] “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” [Indeed all generations do call Mary blessed. But in this moment, is she thinking of the great things the Mighty One has done for her?] “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” [Is she wondering if this is how God shows His mercy?] What beautiful words they are, full of promise, how they resonated, at the beginning . . . but now, at this moment?

The only other time Mary is mentioned in John's Gospel is the wedding at Cana, where she urged her son to replenish the wine. He told her he wouldn't do it, his time had not yet come – but then he did do as she asked, and it was his first miracle. It is only in John's Gospel that his mother Mary's presence at the foot of the cross is specifically mentioned, humble and obedient to the end, not calling attention to herself or her own grief, even at the foot of the cross on which her son is dying. His time had come.

And only John's Gospel records these words of Jesus: “*Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.*” (*John 19:26, 27*) A curious thing, both at the wedding in Cana, and now here, standing at the foot of the cross, Jesus addresses his mother the same way: “Woman”, he calls her; it sounds strange when used by a son to his mother. But Jesus had funny ideas about family and relationships – as he did about many things. He had been quite clear that even blood relations were secondary in importance to the bonds between and the call of the sons and daughters of God. Once while he was speaking to the crowds, his mother and brothers were outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him about it, but he responded, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he had said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (*Matthew 12:46-50*) He had also said, “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Pretty strong words. It could not have been an easy thing to be Jesus' mother. Yet, here she was, and as he was dying on the cross, it was his mother he was worried about.

Some theologians posit that this moment, at the foot of the crucified Jesus, is the beginning of the church. That when Jesus says, “Woman, behold your son,” and to the beloved disciple, “Behold your mother,” he was creating a new relationship, putting together something different: a relationship rooted in faithfulness to him, loyalty no matter what, a relationship forged at the foot of the cross, involving mutual responsibility, one to the other, that is akin to but transcends and goes beyond the bonds of blood ties. In compassion for his mother, and for his beloved disciple, a compassion that he felt in the throes of his own agony, he gives them one to the other – so they would not be alone – but in a way that echoes the intimate and undying bonds of a mother and a son: “From that hour the disciple took her into his own home.” This was no superficial bond he was creating, - he could have said, “Please look after one another, check in on each other,” but he went further, saying “She is now your mother, you are her son.” He created a new relationship, infused with affection, mutuality, responsibility, the unquestioning love and acceptance – the indissoluble bond of a mother and a son – between people whose common bond before that moment was complete, unwavering devotion and faithfulness to Him. His final gift, as he died on the cross, was forging a new relationship between those he loved dearly, those who did not abandon him at the foot of the cross. Mary could again say, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

A few years back, I went to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine for a gathering of women from the Anglican communion. The wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Jane Williams, led a meditation on women as peacemakers. A panel of women from around the world then spoke of the various wars in which they are waging peace in their respective corners of the world – wars such as ethnic battles, but also wars against poverty and disease. A woman from Africa spoke, who heads an organization working to stop the devastation of AIDS in Africa, and she framed her remarks with these very words of Jesus from the cross, in the King James’ version: “Woman, behold your son.” “Son, behold your mother.” She urged women to educate and raise responsible sons – and sons to be responsible, so that mothers are not left alone; but her message – like Jesus’ message – was of universal application, linking mothers and sons the world over, in that mutual affection and responsibility one for the other, forged at the foot of the cross of the Son of God, so that no more sons might die in any battle. So even as they work, moving towards reducing the death toll, they are also forging new relationships, fellow citizens in the family of man, in the kingdom of God. They are not left alone.

As we gather here today at the foot of the cross, faithfully, weighed down with our own sorrows, our own grief, loss and pain, regrets, failures, Jesus looks at us with great compassion. We have not abandoned Him, we didn’t run away, and He does not want us to be alone. He has refashioned for us within our church communities the nature of family, where a new love takes possession of us, a new relationship transfigures the life we live, which may look quite different than that we had expected or imagined. ***“Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.”***

Amen.