

Seven Last Words Part 3

This morning we are looking at the third word from the cross. It is found in John 19. Let's read these verses and then explore this passage. **“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 his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” John 19:25-27**

It is a bit unclear who all was standing near the cross (for instance, who is Mary's sister and who is the wife of Clopas and who was Clopas) but we know for certain Mary the mother of Jesus is there and the disciple whom Jesus loved is always identified as John, the same John who is writing this gospel. They are eye-witnesses to all that is happening and they are standing close enough to Jesus to hear what he says. Artists began to picture Jesus lifted high up on a cross, but historical scholars believe he was merely a few feet above the ground so they were certainly close enough to hear him speak.

Think for a moment what that would be like for Mary his mother or for any mother, to watch as your son suffers and dies on a cross. Think about the great love she had for her son. We Protestants have often been guilty of failing to afford Mary the honor and consideration she is due. But think about what we owe this woman who said yes to the will and plan of God. She said yes to God's plan regardless of the personal cost, sacrifice, and pain. The bible says God freely gave his Son for us, but don't forget, at great cost Mary gave her son as well.

At the annunciation the angel Gabriel told Mary she was highly favored of the Lord and Mary sang, celebrating and rejoicing because “the Mighty One has done great things for me”. As any mother would do, no doubt Mary rejoiced at the birth of her son, but always, always, there was a shadow of something else lurking nearby, the shadow of a cross and death. Now, the hour had come and that shadow had fully fallen and the gospel records, “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother.” Courageous but sorrowing, steadfast to the end, still pondering in her heart. Here she stands. Richard John Neuhaus wrote, “Did she know, as she stood there by her dying son, that this was the way of the strange glory by which he would conquer sin and death? We do not know. But she must have known it would turn out something like this. Old Simeon was probably long dead by now, but she must have thought often about that old man who took the

baby Jesus in his arms when she and Joseph had brought him to the temple. What was it the old man had said to her? ‘Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, and a sword will pierce your own soul also, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.’ Enigmatic words, those. Whatever else they meant, she now knew the piercing sword of grief, cutting her body and soul. That was her body on the cross, for Jesus, virgin born, had no body other than the body he had received from Mary. For Mary, from the start, it had ever been thus – this strangeness touched by glory.”

“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Luke 2:35 That’s what Simeon had prophesied to Mary when Jesus was born. But this was not the first pain or sorrow that had pierced Mary’s heart since Gabriel greeted her that eventful day. Think of the pain Mary endured. The pain of public scorn when it was found she was pregnant before her marriage to Joseph. The pain of finding no room in crowded Bethlehem and having to give birth in a stable and place her new born in an animal’s feeding trough. Think of the pain as she and Joseph and the newborn fled to Egypt as refugees escaping from Herod’s murderous paranoia. She knew the pain of watching as her Son was despised and rejected by his own people, escaping from death by slipping through the crowd. She knew the pain of watching as her son is arrested, tried and condemned, forsaken by his closest friends, scourged and humiliated and now dying in agony upon the cross. Arthur Pink wrote, **“If Christ was the Man of Sorrows, was she not the woman of sorrows?”Arthur Pink**

What could Mary be thinking as she watches her son dying upon the cross? There was no other Mother/Son relationship quite like this. Ever. Mary, the virgin, this young woman engaged to Joseph, carrying in her womb a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. Nine months later Mary gives birth to a son, heaven’s child, her Savior! Quoting from Richard Neuhaus again, “From her he received his humanity, his Jewish humanity: the color of his eyes, the cut of his nose, that odd way of smiling. She potty-trained him, taught him his first words, encouraged his first steps, kissed his scuffed knee and made it all better, picked him up in the dark of nightmare nights and told him everything will be all right, even as she pondered prophecies about piercing swords...”

Mary suffered another pain that all mothers suffer, the pain of having to let go. It was at his first miracle at a wedding in Cana when he said to his mother, **“Woman, what do I have to**

do with you? My hour has not yet come.” John 2:4 It must have hurt, that distancing, having to let go, yet this was the way of letting go of her son and embracing her Savior. Mary was learning what all of us must learn as well, that there is no way to “have to do with Jesus” except to take part in what he referred to as “his hour,” i.e. his mission, his death on the cross. All of us, even his mother, have to come to him by way of the cross and the salvation he provides.

Mary stands near the cross. This is her beloved son. Where else would she be? Where else could she be? She had always been there, Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, quietly in the background of his life and ministry. We will see her again after the resurrection, in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. But today, Mary takes her place at the cross, as always pondering these things in her heart. Once again, Mary says yes to the will of God although again she wonders, “how will this be?” “I am the Lord’s servant” she had told Gabriel. “May it be to me as you have said.” Once again, she offers everything she has of herself to God. This time all she has includes the life of her son. She surrenders him to the cross, again in her heart knowing he is more than her son, he is her dying Savior and Lord. Mary says yes to the mystery of it all, what Neuhaus called “this strangeness touched by glory.”

Jesus, seeing her there, provides for her care. Even in his agony and pain, Jesus is thinking of others and especially of his mother. Even at this moment, dying for the sins of the world, he thinks about the physical needs of his mother. Jesus understood the real challenges she would face after his death and as the eldest son, it was his responsibility to provide for her. But what about the rest of Mary’s family? Where were they?

We don’t know the whole story about Jesus’ extended family. The gospels refer to Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Once while preaching in his home town the people questioned his authority and asked, **“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?” Matthew 13:55** If Mary had children after Jesus, these would be Jesus’ half brothers and sisters. Some think Joseph was much older than Mary and had been married and widowed with children. These would then be step-brothers and sisters. The truth is, the bible doesn’t make it clear. All we know is Jesus was thinking of his Mother and providing for her even as he was dying on the cross. Jesus understood the practical needs of his mother and saw to it those needs

would be met. He was obeying the commandment to honor your father and mother. That commandment was not only to be obeyed as a child, but also as an adult caring for aged parents. Jesus modeled for us what an adult child should do in caring for and providing for his mother.

Church tradition indicates Mary was a widow by this time since Joseph was presumed to be much older and is no longer mentioned in the gospels. It is possible that Mary is estranged from the rest of the family because John's gospel tells us (John 7:5) that "His own brothers did not believe in Him" until after his resurrection. Mary obviously believed and had stayed with Jesus so it is possible the other children had distanced themselves from Jesus and Mary. At the least the rest of the family was likely back in the Galilee and Mary was in Jerusalem. Regardless, she would have no way to make a living and would essentially be homeless and alone without means to provide for herself. Jesus provides for her care by asking John to regard her as his own mother. Essentially he asks John to adopt his mother and to take Jesus' place in caring for Mary. John, writing the gospel says, **"From that time on this disciple took her into his home."**

It's interesting the love we see displayed at this unlovely scene of crucifixion. The love of Jesus for Mary and for John. The love of Mary for her son and now the love of John for Jesus and for Mary. Notice again our text, **"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son', and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'"**

Notice the phrase, "The disciple whom he loved." He loved them all, but John was one of the three that seemed to have a special relationship with Jesus. It was Peter, James and John that made up that "inner circle". It was Peter, James and John Jesus took to the top of the mountain of transfiguration. It was Peter, James and John that Jesus took further into the Garden of Gethsemane and asked that they watch and pray with him the night of his betrayal. It was Peter, James and John, who fell asleep during Jesus' hour of agony in the Garden. Peter had boasted that he would not betray the Lord or abandon him. All the disciples agreed they would even be willing to die with Jesus, but Jesus told them they would all be "scandalized" by him, they would all "fall away" on account of him before the night was over. One would expect at least one of these three would stay with Jesus to the end, but Matthew tells us when Jesus was arrested that night in the Garden of Gethsemane **"...all the disciples deserted him and fled."**
Matthew 26:56.

The fact that John is now standing nearby at the cross means he had a change of heart. Earlier he and Peter had come back to the courtyard of the high priest. Of course it was there that Peter denied the Lord. John must have stayed quietly in the background and now John is near the cross along with Mary and the other women. His love for Jesus brought him back, in spite of his previous cowardice and fear. His love for Jesus brought him to the cross.

The disciple whom Jesus loved, along with Mary his mother. We would have to say that Jesus had a special love for these two people, but notice his love for them did not spare them from sorrow or exempt them from the pain they were experiencing as they watched the One they loved dying upon the cross. Sorrow and love are not incompatible. Mary's soul is pierced by the sword and she grieves. Because Jesus loves us doesn't mean we escape the sorrow and grief that comes with life on this fallen planet. But notice too, even in all the sorrow comes Jesus' great provision and care. For Mary, he provides a son, for John he provides a mother. For us, he provides his Holy Spirit, his presence, his body the church, his family so we will not be alone.

John's love for Jesus brought him back to the cross and it is worthy of note that our love for Jesus must bring us to the cross as well. And notice Jesus doesn't rebuke him for his failure. He doesn't shame him for falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane or for deserting him and running away when the soldiers came, instead, he gave John a new responsibility and a marvelous privilege – to care for his mother as if she were his own. John receives a new calling and a new purpose for his life at the cross.

Consider this, all of us, like John, find a calling and a purpose at the cross. All of us are called to surrender our lives at the cross of Jesus and take up a new life in Him. We find our sins forgiven, we experience his grace as we surrender our life to Christ, take up our cross and follow him.

I don't know what John had planned to do with his life, but now he has a new calling, a new responsibility. Whatever else he will do, he will care for Mary as if she were his own mother. In essence, Jesus' is asking John to take his place in caring for Mary, his mother.

What would you have done if Jesus had asked you to care for his mother? It is quite a responsibility you know, to look after someone the rest of their life. But after all, it's Jesus asking such a thing of us, so of course we would say yes. Right? The truth is, Jesus is asking us to take care of his mother, and more than that. What do I mean?

Once when Jesus was teaching, his mother and brothers came to see him but couldn't get inside because of the crowd. Mark tells us, **“Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’ ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”** Mark 3:31-35

Jesus asked John to take his place and care for his mother. Now he gives us a new definition of who is his mother and brother and sister and he asks us to take his place. “Here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters” he says to us. “Look around. This is my family. Would you care for them in my place? Would you take my place and love them and provide for them?” That’s what he asks of us today. That’s who we are as members of the body of Christ, as Christ’s followers. Erwin Lutzer wrote, “We are his brothers, sisters, and mothers. Widows need someone else’s son to take care of them. Single mothers need surrogate fathers for their children. The ill and infirm need to be visited and cared for with the same spirit by which Christ would serve them. **‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’** Matthew 25:40. Our own parents need the same tender care we would afford to Mary. We are His body, His hands, His feet.” We can’t say we would care for Jesus’ mother Mary if we aren’t willing to act in caring ways toward those Jesus describes as his mother, his brothers, his sisters.

Our calling is made clear at the cross, like Mary’s, like Johns. We are to surrender all we have to Jesus at the cross and then accept our responsibility. We are called to take Jesus’ place in caring for others. We hear Jesus saying to us, “Behold your mother. Behold your brother. Behold your sister. Would you go and be as a son, as a brother, as a sister? Would you go and care for them, provide for them, love them?”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer the Lutheran pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis in World War II wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and follow him...But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call...Only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ.”

Behold your mother. Behold your brother and sisters. Behold your calling and your

cross. It is time for us to return to the cross as John did and surrender to the plan and purpose and calling of God for our lives. It may not be what we had planned and you know loving others, caring for others, it's not easy and it gets messy, but to choose God's way and God's will always proves to be best and blessed. You have to deny yourself at times, but to love God and to love others, to choose the way of love is always the highest way, it is always the best way. This is the way Jesus calls us to from the cross, to love and care for one another. **“From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.”** May we respond as faithfully and promptly as did John.