

“Woman, Behold Thy Son...”

From the Lenten series: The Seven Words From the Cross

Text: John 19:26-27

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Lent III, March 6, 1994

Transcription of the spoken sermon

"He said to her, 'Mother, there is your son;' and to the disciple, 'There is your mother...' "John 19:26-27

My old sidekick of eighteen years, Gordon VanHoven met me in the Narthex last Sunday, and he said to me, "I regret so much that we are leaving for Florida this week, and I'll be unable to be there next Sunday for the third word from the cross." Well, I didn't work with Gordon all those years for nothing. I saw the twinkle in his eye. He was teasing me.

You see, you don't have to be in the ministry many years before you get the opportunity to be a part of one of those community Good Friday services. Did you ever attend one of those three-hour services where the community worthies each take a word from the cross and string you out from twelve to three? Well, if you are a participant in one of those services, your "word" is determined by casting lots, or drawing verses out of a hat. Just before you draw you pray "May it not be the third word, Oh Lord." There are some dramatic words, you know, "Father forgive them," or "Today... Paradise ...," or "My God, Why?" but the third word, "Mother your Son. Son your Mother."

If you're going to do the seven words of the cross, as I have been this Lent you have to include it. You would know if I just skipped over it. And certainly, there are some good things to say. I mean sons ought to provide for their mothers. There's parenting responsibility.

This year, it seems the timing is right. Saturday morning we were having a seminar, "Parenting Parents." I thought, if I go to that seminar, I'll probably get at least half of the material for the sermon. And, as a matter of fact, it was just a wonderful seminar. Very helpful. Some wonderful insights and the kind of support, and talking about family relationships, and responsibilities, and dysfunctions, and so forth, that are so important.

And even better, I knew that, by coincidence, this Sunday we would be gathering around the baptismal font. The family is going to be front and center. What a remarkable providential timing!

Yet, deep in my heart, I really knew that this word was not about what is always said about this word in community Good Friday services. This word is not really about a responsible son providing for his Mother. This word is not really about mutual support or faithfulness until death, or Jesus being so remarkable because, in his dying anguish, he still has time to think about his mother. Those things are important, but really now don't you know that there must be something more going on?

John is telling the story of Jesus. John is painting the portrait of Jesus. John is presenting Jesus as the Christ so that you might believe and have life. John has written the first half of his gospel, the first twelve chapters, giving the signs that Jesus effected, and then the second half of his gospel begins with chapter thirteen. It is the passion narrative, which now comes to its climax at the moment of Jesus dying. And Jesus dying, from John's viewpoint, is a cosmic, redemptive event. Then all at once there is a moment when the action stops and Jesus says, "Mother, your Son, Son, your Mother." Really don't you know that something more is going on than that? What's happening here isn't really a matter of family values, is it? What in the world is John saying to us by this statement of filial responsibility in the midst of this cosmic event?

Think about the fact that Mary appears only one other time in John's gospel. Do you know where the first appearance is? Remember the wedding at Cana in chapter two? A party was going on and either it went on longer than they expected, or the guest list was expanded, or the party was crashed. I don't know which, but they ran out of the good wine. And so Mary, the epitome of the Jewish mother, Mother Mary comes and says, "Boy, they're out of wine." And he does what? He rebukes her. He says, "Woman, what have you to do with me?" "Woman," not "Mom, but "Woman," a still respectful, but a distancing word, not the kind of address that a son gives to a mother. "Woman, understand there is something else going on here. I am not about providing wine for wedding receptions. I am not about the kinds of domestic trivialities that characterize ninety percent of the lives of all of us. Something else is going on here. Woman. My hour has not come."

John uses terms very carefully. He is full of nuance, of subtlety, of artistic creation. "Hour" is John's word for that inexorable plan of God that is being put into effect through the life and ministry of Jesus. And Jesus says, "Woman, back off. The hour is not here." Now it's interesting that the second time that Mary appears in John's gospel is here at the cross. And John addresses her with the same word, "Woman" not "My dear mother." "Woman." And then, after addressing her thus, John moves to the conclusion of the crucifixion. It was like this third word, where he effects the relationship between Mary and the beloved

disciple John, brought him to the realization that now it was finished. He utters first another word, according to John, "I thirst." And then the final word, "It is finished," which means it is completed. The work is done. It is over.

As I think about the words that John uses to tell the story of Jesus and how, in the first place, he said, "Woman, my hour has not come" in the second chapter and now "Woman." I'm realizing that Jesus, according to John's portrait, knows now that God's hour has arrived, and God's hour has come to fruition, and its consummation.

As the first half of the gospel ends, remember that story where Philip and Andrew come to Jesus and they say there are some Greeks here that would like to see him. You never hear again about the Greeks. You never hear again whether or not Jesus ever saw them again or not, but what happens? It's almost like that request from the Greeks was symbolic of those outside of the folds of Israel. Their request to see Jesus triggers something in Jesus. He begins to talk about the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies. If it doesn't die, he says, it abides alone; but if it falls into the ground and dies, it bears fruit. And then he says, "Now is my soul troubled. Now is the hour. What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify your name." And then there is a dramatic voice response from heaven. "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." Then we have Jesus' words following those words saying, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

Jesus knew now that the hour was upon him. Jesus knew now that he had come to that critical moment in which he would effect the eternal purpose of God. The thing that he was not doing in this moment was talking of some domestic duties.

You want some further proof that family values is not what this word was about? In the gospel of Mark, the third chapter verses 31-35, you read that little story about how Jesus' mother, Mary, having not learned that her son was at Cana got Jesus brothers and they went out after him because they had heard he was mad. He was doing all kinds of stuff out there. They wanted to bring him home. Remember that? They couldn't get into the room where he was teaching and so they send a message. The message said, "Your mother and brothers are out there calling for you." Jesus said, "My mother? Who is my mother? My mother, my brothers, my sister are those who do the will of God."

Jesus was not about domestic relationships, Jesus was about an eternal spiritual kingdom. Jesus had to distance himself and to break those physical and biological ties in order that he might accomplish that eternal purpose of God to which he was called: the vision that he had, by which he lived, and for which he died.

At the cross he finally is able to say, "I create this new community of this woman and this man, this ideal disciple and this woman, who now is at the foot of the cross, this new Eve. Now I effect a relationship between them." Mother this is

your son. It's not her son physically and biologically, but Mother, this is your son. Son, this is your mother. You are in a community. You are in a family. This is a new family. It has nothing to do with blood ties, nothing biological, nothing physiological. This is a community of the spirit because that's what Jesus was about, according to John's gospel, from the very beginning.

He came to his own, and his own received him not. But to those who received him he gave power to become the sons of God. Those who were born not of the will of man, not of human will, of human flesh, but of God, of the Spirit.

Old Nicodemus came to him and said, "I don't understand what you're about." And Jesus said, "You're a teacher in Israel and you don't understand? You've got to be born again, or you've got to be born from above, or you've got to be born of the Spirit. Only those who are born by the Spirit and the water, only those will be part of the kingdom of God." And Nicodemus said, "How can you be born when you're old?" And Jesus said, "If you're not born again, if you're not born from above, if you don't transcend every human relationship and every earthly circumstance and configuration, if you are not lifted out of all of that into this eternal breath of God, you don't know yet the first word."

John in his gospel gives us this word from the cross because he wants us to know that Jesus was effecting something new, daring, and universal that transcended every human alignment and alliance.

John Dominique Crossen in his *Biography of a Revolutionary* gives us a little insight into Jesus' relationship to Mary. He says that, in that society, in that time, in that Mediterranean society, it wasn't a sandwich society, such as ours, where there is an upper class, and a middle class, and a lower class, but rather there was a series of pyramids. If I'm a patron, you're a client in our situation right now. But then there will be other relationships in my life where I'm the client and someone else is the patron. And the whole society was perceived that way. If you had goods or services to sell by which you could survive you would peddle it. That's the way you would survive.

Now John tells us in the seventh chapter that Jesus' brothers didn't believe in him and we know that there was never much of an involvement on the part of his brothers. And Mary had her problems. She wanted to bring him home. "But it wasn't," says Crossen, "that they didn't know that Jesus had a power, had something about him, that there was another dimension. It wasn't that they didn't know that Jesus was a healer. What they were irritated about was the fact that he didn't set up shop in Nazareth. Can you imagine what a good thing it would have been for the family to have someone like Jesus to peddle his power? Look at my brother Jesus. Look what he can do. Why, my goodness, they could have had clients all over the place.

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel we have a day in the life of Jesus where he teaches, and he preaches, and he heals, and then he comes to the home of Simon

Peter's mother-in-law. She has a fever, and he heals her. She gets up, and she gives him dinner. And then they said after supper the whole town was outside the door. They're all there. They're saying, "Hey, Jesus, help me, help me." He could have exploited that. My goodness what a good thing he could have had.

Mark 1:35 says: In the great while before dawn Jesus went up into the mountain to pray. And here come the disciples after him. They said, Hey, we've been looking for you. Everybody is looking for you. Everybody is calling for you. Jesus said, "That's why I'm here. That's why I came out. Because I have other places to go."

You see, Jesus, according to Crossan, had mediated the direct, immediate experience of God, because it was his premise that there are no brokers in between. It's not a case of patrons and clients. It's not a case of priesthood or pastors or church institutions or structures. You don't need a priesthood. You don't need a temple. You don't need any of that because God is as close as your breath. God loves you, whoever you are.

Jesus' table fellowship was a statement of the fact that everyone is included and no one is excluded. Crossan says that the very fact that Jesus was an itinerate preacher was the only way he could live out his message. He had to keep on the move because the moment he stopped, people would have built an institution around him. They would have created a liturgy. They would have had rituals to procure his power. They would have been selling healing. They would have been building a kingdom. Jesus wanted none of it. That's why they crucified him. That's why religious people crucified him because, when religious people get a good thing going, they build a church. They build a congregation. They take an offering. Jesus would have none of it. He said, "God is present to you all. And all of you may come to my table. And I will touch the person with Aids. I will make no distinctions. And I will write nobody out." Now, having lived that way, he was ready to die that way. And as a symbolic gesture of what his whole life in ministry had been about, John, at this climatic moment, has Jesus create a new community. He had Jesus say, "Woman, that's your son." And to the son he says, "That's your mother."

It had nothing to do with blood ties. It had nothing to do with biological relationships. It had everything in the world to do with Jesus' whole life and ministry because, according to his understanding of the purpose of God, God wanted to create a community of people that transcended every human barrier and separation.

We had a wonderful morning here yesterday. The church is in the business of supporting families, bringing families together. It is good that parents are concerned for children and children for parents. But we also learned yesterday that while there is a natural bonding because of the biological, the blood ties, that bonding is not all there is. Sometimes there's tension. Sometimes there's abuse.

Sometimes there's brokenness. And if it's true in the family, it's even more true in larger communities. It's true in ethnic groups. It's true in nations.

We live in the twentieth century, which is the bloodiest century, the most violent, the most war filled, the most blood curdling century in the world, and why is that? Because we have not yet learned how to live in human community. We live in families and ethnic groups, and tribes, and nations. We build community spirit by creating over-againstness with the others. We live in a world where Jew massacres Muslims, and a Muslim fires a machine gun into a van of Jewish young people. We live in a world of Northern Ireland, and of South Africa, and of Latin America, and of American city ghettos. We live in a world that is torn apart.

What Jesus was about, dear friends, was not taking care of his dear old mother. You've got to go some other place than the gospels to find an affirmation of family values. Jesus said if you don't hate father and mother, that is, if you will not give a prior commitment to that relationship, if you can not unbind yourself; and parents, if you cannot set your children free, if you cannot recognize that there is a transcendent community, a community of water and blood and Spirit, then you haven't begun to understand what I am about.

I am about creating a human community that transcends every human relationship on every other basis. That means that our relationship together in water, in the Spirit, is the tightest bond and becomes the model for what God intends for the world. And all of our nationalisms, and all of our ideological alignments, and allegiances, and all of our ethnic purity, and all of that that tears apart human community is that which Jesus died to put away in order that there might be a new relationship. "Mother, that's your son." "Son, that's your mother." That's the community and that's what the third word is about, even though certainly it's good to do the best you can for your parents.