

Love Hurts

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: Luke 2:35; John 19:25-27

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Love hurts. God knows. To love is to suffer. There is no other way around it. Loving is suffering because loving is to invest in another and to set the other free. To love, investing in the other and setting them free, is to give up control and to refuse possessiveness. To love and invest in another in order to set them free is to be disappointed again and again and again. Yet, we continue to love, because to cease to love is to cease to be human and to realize the deepest experience of humanness. So, we are caught in a tension. We are caught in that circumstance in which love we must, but, loving, we hurt.

As we focus on the faces around the cross, the focus falls on Mary, the mother of Jesus. I guess Mary could tell us a thing or two about loving and hurting, and in the Gospel story, several vignettes of which we read this morning, we can see that relationship fraught with tension, full of suffering which existed between Jesus and his mother.

Traditionally you have heard this third word from the cross treated as an expression of filial devotion - a son at the point of his death making provision for his mother as a good and responsible son ought to do. That beautiful relationship, parent to child, expressed always with a bit of sentimentality, has warmed the heart of many a mother and caused many a son to squirm just a bit because it's been a long time since his last visit. But, as a matter of fact, to make this scene at the cross, the exchange between Jesus and his mother, an expression of filial devotion or domestic relationships is really to miss the depth of what this scene is all about, because if we have wandered around the Gospel of John very much, we know that it is a highly symbolic Gospel, and we know that John paints every scene with an intention. There must be more going on than simply a dying son providing for his mother, although that certainly is a noble thing to do. Here we have the committing of his mother into the hands of one who was not her son, the committing of his mother into the hands of the faithful disciple, the beloved disciple, the one that appears in the Gospel of John.

Traditionally, we think of John the disciple as writing the Gospel and speaking of himself in disguise as the beloved disciple, but that really isn't the case. We don't know who wrote this Gospel. It perhaps arose from a Johannine circle, perhaps around the area of Ephesus where tradition has it he spent his last years. If you visit Ephesus, they'll even show you the place where Mary spent her last days under John's care. But, we really don't know about all of that. That's tradition; maybe some of it has historical basis; it really doesn't matter.

The point is that John, in portraying this scene, is not talking about a son taking care of his mother; he is talking about Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church, creating a new family, a new community, a new family of God. He is saying to his natural mother, "Be the mother in the charge of this faithful disciple who is the model of faithfulness," because what Jesus is claiming according to this event is that out of his death and resurrection will arise a new community, a community of faith, a community that will transcend bloodlines, that will be something other than the natural family into which we are born and over which we have no control. This will be a family of faith; this will be a community of commitment and mutuality; this will be a community of mutual love and respect. Out of his death and resurrection, the Gospel writers say, will come the creation of this new reality, this new family that is something more than the natural family.

The natural family is so terribly important in our society. It's getting a lot of press these days in rather silly and sentimental ways, as though we're coming to a time when family doesn't exist anymore and, frankly, I don't see that. But I'm always surprised and taken aback a bit when I reflect on the natural family relationships Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. The family is so important - it's where we are socialized, it's where we are nurtured, it's where we are loved and we learn to love, ideally.

But, the family has its problems, too. The family is also the scene of subordination and domination and possessiveness and control, and relationships of power. The natural family is a great gift, but also can be a threat to the full development of one's humanity, of the following of one's passion, of one's vision. Families can be coercive and manipulative. Families can be destructive, and this is rather clearly set forth in the Gospels. Families are terribly important, with wonderful possibilities. But, in dysfunctional families, and I include us all there, there are also serious threats to the full growth and development of a human individual.

The Gospels are quite interestingly frank about this. Let us just focus on Jesus and his mother. I read three passages, but let me cite a couple others. The first one, the words of old Simeon as he holds the infant in his arms and he looks at Mary and says, "A sword will pierce your soul." Luke likes to use foreshadowing as a literary technique in the writings of his Gospels. This is one of those moments. He is signaling to us already in the beginning in that beautiful scene in

the temple that there is going to be something more than domestic tranquility in the future.

Had I read on in that chapter, we would have found Jesus at age 12 with his family at the temple. They pack up and go for home and he's not with them. I can't quite believe this scene; I can't quite imagine it - a 12-year-old staying behind, not even being missed for a day? Back they come and there he is engaged in theological discourse. (I like that boy.) But, there's no apology. There's rather this distancing. Now, if you're a good mother, it sends a chill up your spine. He says, "I must be about my Father's business." Already a signal that he's going to need some space.

And then, although the Gospels don't give us a chronology of the life of Jesus, if we go over to the Gospel of John, his first miracle, John tells us, was the making of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The supply was running down. His mother comes and says, "Boy, take care of it." He says, "Woman, what concern is that to you or me? My hour is not come." If you had shivers before, you've got chills now. Because he is saying in the polite language of the evangelist, "Mother, get lost."

And then, of course, the passage I read from Mark, in the time of his popularity in Galilee when the crowds were pressing in upon him and he was obviously becoming a threat to the social order. The authorities come down to check him out and they say he's got a demon. And so, he takes them on to explain that it's impossible that he could be demonic because if the demonic is against the demonic, its kingdom will fall. Rather, he is claiming that he is not of an unclean spirit, but of the Spirit of God. But the word got out - he has a demon. He is "beside himself." He is eccentric, literally. You know what it is to be eccentric? It's to be out of center. That is out of center with conventional wisdom, out of center with social custom. He is not conforming. His socialization, obviously, has fallen short at some point. He is an embarrassment to his mother and to his brothers, as well as being a threat to those in authority. And so, they say he is eccentric, he is out of himself. Eccentric, because, refusing to follow the center according to social expectation, he lived out of his own center, and anyone who lives out of his or her own center will be out of kilter with the environment around them. You can count on it.

So, mother and brothers come to the place where he is; they want to pack him up and bring him home, but they can't get in because the place is crowded, so they send a message and he says, "My mother and my brothers are here? Who are my mother and my brothers? Those who do the will of God - you are my mother and my brothers and my sisters." Well, if you had a shiver before, and then chills, by now, you must be in a paroxysm of horror. This is Jesus, huh?

The scene at the cross, finally, "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother," which with the typical sentimentality that is so rife in the Christian Church, we claim that it's now made okay. But that's not what it's about. I do not

mean to say there is any lack of filial devotion, any lack of care, any lack of love for his mother. But, according to the portrayal of the Evangelist, he is saying, "Woman, do you get it now? Do you see that I had to separate and distance myself in order to get your focus off that which is natural and given, the bloodlines, in order that you might transcend to something that is more spiritual, to a community of faith, a relationship that is beyond anything that is given by human possibility?"

And so, we have that relationship between Jesus and his mother. It is a relationship that we don't sit very easily with because we don't often want to face the fact that real love invests in the other and sets them free. Real love seeks not to possess, control or dominate. Real love sets free and is disappointed again and again and again, but continues to love, nonetheless, always believing that this time love given will make whole.

Love hurts. God knows.

The family is so terribly important, and yet we need honestly to face the fact that it can also be an arena of such brokenness and dysfunction because of the pitfalls of loving... my fear of the loss of your love, and so, seeking to control, seeking to control because I love and I want to spare you. But I can't spare you because if I love you, I set you free with all the risk involved, simply standing by and waiting for the time when I'm needed again.

Ah, love in the family has its pitfalls. We find it so difficult to trust and set free, because, well, you might embarrass me. Mary was embarrassed by Jesus. We can't fault her for that. The brothers were angry. We can identify with that. How often when our children have gotten into trouble has our first thought not been their pain, but our embarrassment? If my kid fouls up, it reflects on me. Therefore, kid, straighten up. Remember who I am in this community. And that's flawed love, instinctive though it be.

And we love and make the other dependent. The jargon in the Social Sciences in the last decade or more, growing out of recovery groups and 12-Step programs, the jargon is all about co-dependency. Your misbehavior frustrates me, so I seek to try to control it, but I almost find my own reason for being in trying to control your misconduct.

Our families and our human relationships stumble again and again into one or all of these pitfalls. We become conscious of it, we become aware, we step back, we get hold of ourselves. We gain perspective again. We take a deep breath, we plunge back in and before you know it, we're at it again, because it's that kind of instinctual response that we make in the crises of those we love.

But, real love invests in the other and sets them free. God knows. That's how I understand the biblical teaching of the love of God. That's what the Creation is all about, giving the Creation elbow room, not dotting every i and crossing every t,

pulling strings, but giving us the frightful freedom to fail, not then to forsake, but to begin again, always loving, trusting, setting free, not dominating or controlling or possessing or making dependent.

We haven't done so well in the Church with that. Too many people in my position have made too many people in your position dependent. Loving, to be sure, but also needing to control and manipulate rather than setting you free, letting you hear of the God Who sets you free, Who affirms you on your way, Who calls you to grow up, to mature, to enter into that kind of reciprocal relationship of mutuality.

God's love, seen best in the scriptures, is a suffering love. It is the suffering that is the inevitable counterpoint to loving and it is that loving in which alone we find the fullness of the human experience.

We went to a movie this past week. It's not going to win any Academy Awards, I think, but if you want to have an hour and a half of pure family dysfunction, visit *Marvin's Room*. Two sisters with total brokenness - one marries, has a couple of kids; they're a mess; she's divorced. The other gives it all up and goes home to take care of an aged father and an aged aunt. Now, the one who goes home, having given her life to the care of these elderly family members, has a terminal disease which perhaps the estranged sister or her son can alleviate through a transplant. And so, we bring all of these disparate units together in all of their dysfunction, and you can cut the tension, it is such a picture of human brokenness, and nothing works out. The sister will die, but there is a redeeming moment in which the two sisters look at each other and the one who is to die, with tears in her eyes, says, "I've known such love in my life," and the other responds with some guilt for her own lack of concern or love, saying, "I know. I know. They love you so much." The dying sister says, "No, no. It's not their love for me; it is my love for them! I loved them so much. I'm so lucky!"

You see, St. Francis was right - it is in loving that we are loved; it is in loving without quarter asked, without condition, without control or possession, without sentimentality or dependence - it is in loving and setting free that I find the center in myself and God's highest for my humanity.

But, love hurts. God knows.