

The Words of Lent 3

(The Family of God)

Isaiah 54:4-8

John 19:26-27

OT Scripture Lesson: “Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; neither feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced. But you will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your husband is your Maker whose name is the Lord of Hosts, and your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected. Says your God, “For a brief moment I have forsaken you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In an outburst of anger, I hid my face from you for a moment; but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord your Redeemer.

NT Scripture Lesson: “When Jesus therefore saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son! Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household.”

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

A tax examiner from the IRS was questioning a couple about the way they completed their tax form. The couple was asked why they had failed to indicate who was head of the household. Their answer was simple. They said, “Sir, we have been married for thirty-five years, and we have been arguing over the answer to that question for thirty-five years. Please be assured that when we come to an agreement, we’ll be very glad to answer the question.”

The first word that Jesus spoke from the cross was a model prayer of forgiveness for His enemies. The second word, spoken in response to the first, was an answer to the prayer of a mortal enemy who had become a devoted friend.

This week’s word, the third word from the cross, was spoken to those who were nearest and dearest to our Lord, His mother and his beloved disciple John. Here He speaks His last words to the people He loved most.

We would expect that the Lord of Life, who had opened the way to eternal life for everyone else, would not neglect His responsibilities to His own family. And while His words here address many concerns we would expect Him to speak of in this hour, we hear others which are quite unexpected.

We should not be surprised to find that Jesus, like most other sons in the culture of His day, would be committed to performing His duties as the eldest son. The Jews believed in the ideal of the nuclear family as the model of community established by God in the Garden of Eden. The Bible speaks of the family of heaven that God himself was part of before the world was made, consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To the Jews, family was a sign of God's blessing, and children were the measure of a family's wealth. A man without family was a man without God's blessing. According to this way of thinking, children were not merely born into a family, they were created by God as a gift to the family.

Thus, to be a parent was the highest calling of heaven, and was a solemn responsibility that required wisdom and maturity. This was because the Jews believed that what children would become as adults depended greatly on the values that had been taught to them by their parents.

Thus, in Proverbs 22:6 we read, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it." And because the Jews placed great emphasis on the obligations of parents to their children, they also placed great emphasis on the duty of children to their parents.

We live in a society where personal rights and freedoms have been increasingly accentuated over duties and responsibilities. I believe this has been the cause of an imbalance in family relationships that must be corrected immediately to eliminate future problems in our society.

Many people these days don't seem to understand that when you become part of a family, your life no longer belongs solely to you. When I provide counsel to couples who are planning to marry, I tell them that if their marriage is to succeed, they will have to put the needs of the relationship above their own needs as individuals. For them to do this will require that they love the relationship more than they love themselves.

This is a hard pill to swallow for a generation who have been raised in a culture of entitlement where everything is always about them and their constant ongoing need to be made “happy” all the time!

As a result, we have countless dysfunctional homes in America today where no one claims responsibility for the day-to-day workings of the family as a unified whole. The primary reason that the first commandment given by God to Moses relating humans to each other: “Honor your Father and Mother that your days will be long” was provided to establish family as the basis of community.

All human rights involve obligations and responsibilities, regardless of whether they are in society at large or with the family at home. Unfortunately, in the present culture of narcissism, there are those who sincerely believe that because they did not wish nor choose to be born, they are absolved of any further obligations and responsibility to anyone or anything.

In providing for His mother as He did from the cross, Jesus expressed the beliefs of His people that family relationships require the fulfillment of certain obligations and responsibilities. I think it is important to note that by simply doing His duty as a son, Jesus demonstrated that the everyday cares and concerns of life were still in His mind even in this hour of suffering and pain. Thus, we see that even the weighty burden of “being about His Father’s business” on the cross did not diminish His family responsibilities to His bereaved and widowed mother.

During my candidacy studies for ministry, my mentor once reminded me of the importance of “putting family responsibilities first before ministerial responsibilities.” And that “the church’s house cannot be put in order if the pastor’s house is not first put in order.” I have strived to live by that maxim.

Following in this way of thinking, we would anticipate the devotion that we see coming from a loving son toward His mother however, in His address to her was not the words we would expect to hear, He said, “Woman, behold your son.”

As I thought of the emotional impact of these words from Jesus on His mother at that time, several questions came to mind. I wondered...

Would it have been too much for Jesus to offer some sort of explanation to her of the meaning of His suffering and dying in this way?

Would it have been too much for Him to elaborate a little more on the meaning of “Son of God” to help her understand why these things must be?

Might this not have been a good time to touch on the reason God had given Him the name “Jesus” all those years ago when He was born in Bethlehem?

Even more shocking than His lack of clarity on these important subjects I think, was the fact that He spoke no words of comfort or encouragement to her about life after death, not His nor hers. No mention of the “paradise” He promised to the thief.

In terms of the life expectancy of a Jewish woman of her time, she was by now getting well along in years. Yet we hear no words of consolation spoken to her in this final hour about The Father’s house having “many mansions” as He had once before rhapsodized about to His disciples.

In fact, there was no mention to her at all of any heavenly certainty of glad family reunions beyond this world of crosses to bear, griefs to carry, and graves to fill.

No, indeed, instead of giving Mary a comforting vision of heaven and her life to be, Jesus spoke here only of the cares of the present life that are now before her. Here Jesus was acting strictly as the “head of the household” does by providing for the immediate needs of his family.

Thus, even here on the cross of His own suffering and death, He remembered that His mother must have bread to eat and a roof over her head, not for simply tomorrow or the next day, but even now this very day. And Jesus didn’t speak of heavenly things to his mother from the cross not because He wished to deny her this comfort, but because He had already provided a “mansion” for His mother in heaven, as He has done for every believer. And now, here in His last few hours with her He was providing a home for her on earth too.

You know, it has been said that “home” is the place that when you go there, they have to take you in. In this way, “home” is more than merely a place to live, it is a place to love and be loved.

If a home with love may then be called a house of heaven on earth, a home without love must surely be another name for a house of hell.

Jesus, as the head of the household, wanted to give heaven's best gift to the one who had given Him earth's best blessing, therefore He said to His mother, "Behold your son," and then to His beloved disciple, "Behold your mother."

Perhaps the least understood words of Jesus from the cross is the command that his mother adopt another son from a different mother when she already had three other sons of her own. Since these other sons had been raised by the same parents that raised Jesus, you would think they would be the logical choice to assume this responsibility. Yet, Jesus completely ignored them as if they didn't exist, and instead placed the earthly needs of His mother in the care of His best friend, John.

Why would Jesus have acted in this way? Why would He purposely circumvent other members of His own immediate family, in effect, removing them from the responsibility and blessing of providing care for their mother?

As I pondered this question, I was reminded that Jesus did not have a very good relationship with His brothers, which had perhaps led to dissension and infighting among the members of His own household (John 7:4-5).

In Luke 2:34-35 we read, "And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold this child is appointed for the rise and fall of many in Israel and for a sign to be opposed, and a sword will pierce even your own soul."

When old Simeon took the baby Jesus into his arms, he warned Mary that this day would come. And over the years that had passed since that day she found his words to be sadly true, even in her own home.

In Matthew 1:19 we read that Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus was a righteous man, which would have meant that he followed all the laws and customs of Jewish society. There can be no doubt that his "zeal" for righteousness in following the law would have been shared by his wife and children.

However, Jesus did not always agree with His parents in adhering to the laws and customs of Jewish society as is seen by His disobedience and insubordination to them as a child in the temple telling them with impudence, "Don't you know that I must be about My Father's business" and then again when He later declared that a "prophet has no honor even in his own house" which bore a subtle witness to the brokenness of His relationship with His own family.

It would seem that even his mother Mary, despite the angels, and shepherds, and wise men, never quite understood the depth of the relationship Jesus had with His heavenly Father.

I think He may have pushed open the door of the family schism even wider when He preached His first sermon in His home church. We can imagine the family gathered for church, awaiting with great pride and joy to hear the gracious words of hope and life that would soon be flowing from the mouth of their dear son.

But, as if to be purposely contrary and obstinate, Jesus stood up and said that the words of the prophet Isaiah concerning the future coming of the Messiah were already fulfilled in Him this very day. We can imagine how hot the anger of His brothers burned against Him, and how His mother's heart was broken.

And as if to add further insult to injury, when His family later came to talk to Him about what He had said, He refused to see them, completely ignoring them saying to those present that His family are not those who are related by blood, but instead are those that are related through the "keeping of His commandments."

I think that was about the last straw for them, and they realized that there was nothing they could do but go home and leave Him with His followers. It seems that Mary too went with them, at least initially, perplexed and confused as much as they were about her oldest son's strange behavior.

Even after three additional years had passed, she still did not understand Him, but by now the dark shadows were gathering that could no longer be ignored and so she broke with her family and left her other sons to take her stand beside Jesus, as her Lord and Savior.

John chronicles in his gospel that the brothers of Jesus refused even to the end of His life to believe in their brother despite the many miracles and testimonies. But beyond all this, Mary loved Him with a mother's love that was stronger than life and death. Thus, we read in John 19:25 that at the very end, "there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother." Oftentimes we will find our true family only after we break free from bondage to our birth family.

To sum it all up quite simply, Jesus gave the care of His mother to His best friend John because he was the only "family" Jesus had in this world. And would be the only family He was sure would be with Him in the world to come.

To be “family” with Him in this way meant that Mary and John were nearest to Him in love and devotion. For Jesus to give the care of His mother to His best friend over and above His own brothers would place the entire family in danger of great shame for all the world to see.

Spiritually, the place of humility has always been the place of greatest usefulness to the gospel. This is true because our Lord cannot use the souls of those who only call themselves by His name nearly so well those who act in His name.

This ideal of *the usefulness of the soul* is the key to maintaining the vital family relationships that Jesus mentioned that are necessary through the “keeping of his commandments.” I pray that the day never comes when we refuse to stand at the cross with our Lord through the bond of family relationship that has been predicated by our willingness to be “useful” through the “keeping of his commandments” and by sharing His place of shame and suffering in the world.

Here then we see the last words of Jesus to his family on earth, “Behold your son...Behold your mother” which begs the question, “What then is there of the family relationships on earth that will commend their application to heaven?” We have our two-word answer in vs.27b. *Immediate obedience.*

In John 19:27 we read, “And from that very hour the disciple took her into his own home.” Here we read that the bond of family was strong enough to command the immediate yielding of the family will to the dictates of the head of the household. I am inclined to believe based on the language of the text that John acted upon Jesus’ request without further delay to spare His mother the additional agony of the last hour.

Thus, by her having now the necessary earthly shelter in the home of a “true son” she was able to wait in the comforting fellowship of “family” until the clouds of Friday darkness passed to become the brilliant sunrise of Easter morning.

Jesus once reminded His disciples that He had not come to bring peace on earth but rather unrest and division. Thus, He carried a two-edged sword that cut a swath between the people of Judea, and between the members of even his own family. A sword of truth that still cuts to the heart of matters and still divides the people of families and nations even on this very day.

But family brokenness and division is not the final word from the cross, nor is it the final story of Jesus and His family. The sword that divides is also the sword that unites. And the Jesus who is Captain of the Lord's army, is also the same Jesus who is the Prince of Peace. The Christ of God who did not hold back His hand from dividing His family on earth by the sword of truth, did so only that He might save them to become His family in heaven.

In Acts 1:14 we read this report of the disciples of Jesus which states that, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and His brothers." This is the rest of the story.

In the days following the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, we find Mary present with the disciples at the coming of Pentecost, and then again on the road to Ephesus as the mother of not just one heavenly son, but also of four earthly sons.

Her surrogate son John is with her of course, but so also now are her other three sons, James, Simon and Jude, who have now joined with their mother at the cross of their Lord and Savior Jesus, their eternal brother in body and spirit. This same Jesus, who they refused to believe in, they would one day give their lives for, even as He had done for them.

Woman, behold your sons...sons behold your mother. One holy family of faith united together. This was what the family of God meant to Jesus because to Him family ain't family, until they are a family of God.

And all God's people say: "Amen" and amen.