

Sermon: Blood Relatives (3rd Word from the Cross)**Scripture: John 19:25****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 14, 2020**

This Lent our worship series is on the 7 last words of Jesus from the cross, each “word” being a phrase that Jesus uttered with his last breath before he died, not the last words he spoke, for we believe Jesus still speaks, but the last of his singular bodily human form and for centuries Christians have meditated upon these last words, believing there is potency in what he spoke in his last hour so full of suffering and so marked by the end.

We aren’t told what the first words of his earthly life were but it was likely the word imm or immah, the Hebrew or Aramaic word for mama, maybe as he reached up to her and wrapped his arms around her neck and when Mary lifted him up with an embrace, smelling the crown of his head as he snuggled into her. Have you smelled a baby’s head lately...I mean, one that’s your own or your grandchild or do you remember that smell? It’s heavenly and I imagine that as she nursed Jesus, Mary smelled him and cherished him, awe-struck in beholding the mystery of his life emerging from her own. She was the one he first trusted and who cared for him, protected him in his vulnerability, fed him from her body, nudged him out from her nest to stretch and grow into the boy and eventually the man he would become – immah – that might have been the first word he spoke from the cradle, for a mother who would have given her life for him had he not required something even more of her, which was to behold him giving his life for everyone else. That is a sorrow deeper than I can imagine.

I spoke with Lynne and Paul Rahmeier this week to see how they were after the funeral of their beloved 53 year old daughter-in-law, the wife of their son and the mother of their two grandchildren and Paul said to me “well, God didn’t accept my deal with him to take me and leave Marty here with my family.” The only thing worse than being tortured and executed on the cross, would be to be the parent of one dying in such a way. Mary was there at the beginning when his form was pure, a new flower opening to a new world, holding him with joy, and Mary was there at the end when his form was broken and poured out for the sake of an old weary sinful world, and as Michelangelo’s famous sculpture depicts, she was there at the end holding his body as well. She had been warned by Simeon, the old man in the temple when she and Joseph had brought the 8-year old Jesus to the temple for his dedication: “and a sword Mary shall pierce your heart”. The cross which carried her son must have been the sword that pierced her heart.

And that son of hers was a remarkable human being. There from the cross with his dying breath he first prayed for his executioners “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And then later after some time passed he spoke to the man crucified beside him “today, you shall be with me in paradise.” And then at some point in his dying agony he was able to focus his attention enough on those who huddled as close to him as they could get, beneath the cross. Of all the people who knew him and loved him, of all those who followed him around the countryside and listened to him preach and teach and heal the sick, of all those who waved palm branches as he entered Jerusalem and hailed him as the coming Messiah, John’s Gospel says that only four stayed. Only 4 had the strength, the capacity, the wherewithal to remain with him and endure with him to the end.

Faithful Mary Magdalene was there. Mary, the wife of Cleopas who was Jesus' aunt, was there. One of his beloved disciples was there. And Mary his mother.

Jesus gathers his focus upon them, and his strength to say to his mother and his best friend - "Woman, behold thy son... behold thy mother." His third word from the cross.

And with these words Jesus makes clear something that we witnessed him forging throughout his earthly life. When he was 12 his mother gets on his case for ditching them in Jerusalem and he responds to her somewhat baffled, "didn't you know I would be in my father's house" and later when he's an adult his mother and brothers because they fear he's getting himself into some serious trouble – which he is - suggesting he is the Messiah and all, and Jesus says to those gathered "who is my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God in heaven is my sibling and my mother."

We can imagine this too was not easy for Mary to hear and could have been one of the edges of the sword to pierce her heart as well, but it was critical to Jesus' mission and purpose. He was forging a new family and calling together a new community that transcended blood relations. The two sacraments that we celebrate as a church – Baptism and Communion – extend this out to all of us. They are the symbolic gateways to this larger connectivity so that in Him, through the water and the blood, we all become siblings in the family of God. Caroline, James, and all of us become Jesus' blood relatives, you see, siblings in God's family. Now we do not merely belong to our biological family but to the family of Jesus Christ, we are the children of God. That's what he's doing when he says "Woman, behold thy son... behold thy mother." He removes himself from the equation and becomes the ground of a new relationship, the new covenant in his

blood. He says basically, "You are all my blood relatives, all children of God. I die to reveal and offer this reality to the world."

Is there any doubt of the truth of this? Have we not learned yet how interconnected we all are? There are certainly vestiges of an old mentality that still sees races as separate, some superior and others inferior, a weary mentality that still wants to build walls to pretend we here are not connected to you over there, a small mentality that sees our need to take care of ourselves here as distinct from you taking care of yourself over there, a fearful mentality that we'll be better off circling the wagons and fending for ourselves. If the internet itself has not highlighted enough for us how globally interconnected we are then this virus drives it home. A global pandemic is only possible because we are so profoundly and beautifully connected with one another in the human family. There is only one race and that is the human race and only one place which is God's country and that is this sacred little globe and only one destiny for us which is us bound together heading to where we ultimately belong.

This was the Jesus movement, an expansion outward in ever widening circles of love and care. Whenever people wanted to draw the circle narrower, which they often did, and still do, Jesus broke it open and drew it wider and whenever people want to pin him down, or should I say nail him down, it only makes him more elusive and embracing with even pierced arms stretched wider to include that ever widening human family.

And so what becomes clear in this strange and scary time of a global pandemic is an interesting paradox. At a time when we must separate ourselves physically to arrest this virus, we become aware of how profoundly interconnected we are with one another. And if this is true physically then how

much more so mentally and psychologically and spiritually. And if we as a church are to work at anything it is to make this truth more a lived reality. Yes, of course we take care of our families but very quickly, very quickly, that responsibility expands outward to the circle of our church family which then very quickly expands out from there to our human family and of course our creaturely and creation family as well, that is the ever expanding movement that is the real and Jesus Movement here in the 21st century.

Let us take this time when the world is shutting down a bit and the harried and hectic pace of our lives is released and the frenzy of the entertainment industry and sports industry and wall street and travel industry and all of it which left a big fat foot on the gas pedal of lives is released for a moment, let us ask ourselves who can we now see who we haven't seen in a while, who can we reach out to that we haven't in a while, what can we noticed that we haven't noticed in a while? What is most essential that we've forgotten is SO essential? And may even the fear of Covid-19 lead us towards a renewed dependence upon God and one another as we realize ultimately that nothing can separate us or the ones we love and all the human race from the love of God that was revealed in Jesus Christ on the cross, breaking down the boundaries of separation and saying to all:

“Woman behold, your son... behold your mother.”