

“A Word from the Cross: Community”

As we begin the Lenten journey with Jesus and turn our hearts and minds towards Jerusalem, through the Garden of Gethsemane to the courtroom of Pontius Pilate and finally to the cross of Calvary, the writers of the Bible give us a beautiful insight into the very soul of the Messiah. Authors and composers over the years have referred to these glimpses of Christ’s heart as the “Seven Last Words on the Cross”, although in truth, Jesus says more than seven words.

During Lent, I will offer an interpretation of each of these words that Jesus gives us and, with the Spirit's help, invite us to reflect on what they mean to us today as modern day disciples. During our Ash Wed. service, we heard the first word: FORGIVE.

Of the gifts of words offered by Christ on the cross, the word that we heard this morning has always puzzled me the most. “Woman, here is your Son! Here is your mother!” As we listen to each of these thoughts during the Lenten season, you will see that all of Christ's other words were either words of comfort to us or words spoken to fulfill the Scriptures. But this word, at least at first glance, seems more like an affront. As if Jesus is saying, "Mary, look at the child you are losing." And as a mother and grandmother myself, this word seemed just too harsh.

Even the second part, "Son, behold thy mother", as King James records it, could be interpreted as another burden that Jesus is adding to the beloved disciple's plate after his death. But the Spirit urged me to look past my negative impressions and when I did, I realized that this word is Jesus' effort to create a family, a community, before his death.

In Jesus' day, one's family of origin determined your whole life, your complete identity, and your entire future. By this I do not mean that family is about that nosy question that we often ask here in the south, "Sugah, what does YOUR daddy do?" No, in Jesus' day you didn't have to ask these questions. If your daddy was a fig farmer, YOU were a fig farmer. If your daddy was a Pharisee, YOU were a Pharisee. If your daddy was a fisherman from Galilee, you MARRIED a fisherman from Galilee. And what your daddy did determined, for life, your social, economic, and even religious status. Your family was who YOU were. But I believe that, on the cross that day, Jesus formed a new kind of family. A new kind of community, ultimately called the church.

In the community that we call church, we are thrust together with people of different backgrounds, races, social status, needs and sometimes even beliefs and told that, because we are family, we must stick together. I believe that Jesus initiated this idea on the cross when he gave his mother to his beloved disciple. And as it turns out, it was a wonderful idea!

Because when you think about it, the diversity of the group that gathered at the cross sounds more like the people in our day. In our community. People who have different needs and backgrounds who find themselves woven together by some common thread. Think about those gathered at the foot of the cross that day. Some gathered out of morbid curiosity, some out of a need to shout "Crucify Him", some out of sadness to weep as their loved one suffered, some out of fear as to what would become of them. What I mean is that they were there for a variety of reasons, but at the end of the day, they all had one thing in common – THE CROSS.

And because we are a community of faith we have the same thing in common. We are a community of the cross. And in today's divisive times, where people almost seem to be looking for things to argue about, we need this vivid reminder. So what does it mean for us to belong to the Community of the Cross?

First, this word from Jesus reminds us that the cross itself joins us to Jesus in his baptism and therefore, in his resurrection. In baptism, we are adopted into a larger family – the church family – that will help nurture us in the Scriptures and their meaning for our lives. And ultimately, it is our baptism that calls us into service in the church family that we have been joined to.

The story is told of a two year old child that was being baptized one Sunday. The minister leaned the child back over the holy font, dipped his hand into the water and dribbled it on the toddler's head. Evidently, not pleased with his newly wet status, the young boy pulled himself up, leaned directly into the minister's lapel mic and declared: "You are a bad man!"

Of course, this newest member of God's family did not understand the symbolism of being cleansed of his sins. But as we get older, we realize that being a disciple in the community of the cross calls us to a different standard of living than people of other communities who do not have Jesus Christ as their head.

I believe another reason that Jesus offered this word in the midst of his suffering was to make a statement to those who had put him ON the cross. You see, while the principalities and powers of the day believed that they were tearing Jesus' family apart by taking him away from his followers, Jesus is busy putting it back together.

So this word is a statement of assurance that, as members of the community of the cross, we do not have to be alone unless we choose to. That we have given brothers and sisters in Christ to help us. Family who will laugh when we laugh, rejoice when we rejoice and weep when we weep. Indeed, my celebrations are yours and your sorrows are mine as we walk the way of Christ together.

That is why it seems easier in a church to reach out to someone who has lost a loved one, even if you don't know them well. Because you know that they have the hope of resurrection undergirding their sorrow. That is why we offer to Mentor confirmands and volunteer to teach Bible School and pay \$160 for Frances Lynch's pound cake at the Youth Bake Auction. Because the church – your community of faith – was directed by Jesus on the cross to stand with one another in all times and in all circumstances. And in many ways, for those who don't have family nearby – because of death, distance or disagreement – the church can and will be their family.

And amid the tumult of suffering on that night so long ago, I wonder if Jesus recalled the refreshingly simple prayer offered in the Psalm that we just heard. The "pray-er" of the Psalm promises lifelong devotion to God because his prayers for help have been answered. And I know that personally, many of MY prayers for help have been answered when God sent someone *in this church* to encourage me, uplift me, admonish me, or comfort me at just the time when I needed it most. Perhaps, as Christ committed Mary and John to each other's care, he was setting the stage for them and for us to be reminded of our blessings when we care for one another in the community that we call our church home.

And lastly, we might consider that by giving his mother into John's care, Jesus set the role model that the church community has followed. Not only are we to care for our parents, our children, those we promise to nurture at their baptism and that we mentor through Confirmation. As the community of faith established on the cross, we are called to care for the greater community – all of God's children.

We do this when we take the time as we hurry through the grocery store to pick up extra applesauce to go into a child's backpack that might be hungry all weekend without it. We do this when we set aside four hours to go to the Soup Kitchen and not only feed the hungry but nourish their souls with hope and a smile. We do this when we put our change in an envelope every night when we empty our pockets to give on the last Sunday of the month during Pennies for Hunger. There are so many ways that we, the beloved disciples of Jesus' community today, have the opportunity to take the tired, the lonely, the hungry, the lost into our hearts, arms and prayers.

And after all, Jesus once said in his earthly ministry, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother". (Mark 3:35) By giving Mary and John to each other at his death, he is reminding us of the creative ways that the will of God may present itself in our lives.

So while this word may at first seem harsh, after examining it more closely, I have decided that this word was indeed a tender word of love to his mother and his friend. He offered them out of his humanity, the suffering he was feeling at knowing how his death would affect them so. AND he offered them out of his Divinity, which enabled him to consider their needs in the midst of his own personal misery.

James Montgomery Boice says that in his words to John and Mary, Jesus created a new society. This society is not segregated according to race or nationality. It is not predicated upon social standing or economic power. It consists only of those whose faith meets at the cross and whose expectations of forgiveness flow from it as well.

As we come to the table of our community – that is the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before he went to the cross, we see again the beautiful blending of human and divine that makes Jesus' new community so unique.

We eat ordinary bread and drink ordinary juice and remember the EXTRAORDINARY love and grace of God. We remember that the great legacy that Jesus gave us on the cross was the forgiveness of our sins *and* the legacy of his victory over your death and mine. And the bread and the cup remind us all of the new community that Christ gave us on the day of his death. A community of faith and hope where all are welcome. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.