

“Behold your son...Behold your mother”

This is the third message in our series on Jesus’ final words from the cross. Over the past two weeks, we have addressed “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” and “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Our words for this week come from the Gospel of John. While not named so in the Gospel, the author of this book is the disciple whom Jesus loved. Our scripture for today is John 19:25-27:

“Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour, the disciple took her into his own home.”

Our scripture today celebrates our namesake: Community. By inviting John to care for Mary and Mary to accept John as a son, Jesus was highlighting the importance of community. Community is necessary in our lives, perhaps never more so than when we are going through the valley of the shadow of death, as Mary and John were on the day Jesus was crucified. Jesus knows this is incredibly difficult for them and that they will need each other in the days to come.

For John, losing his friend and rabbi Jesus must have been devastating. This is a young man who followed Jesus for three years. In the ancient rabbinic tradition, he and the other disciples would have walked behind Jesus on their travels from town to town. They would have listened to his teachings along the way, they would have literally followed in his footsteps, they would have been covered in the dust of their rabbi’s feet. Imagine how honored John was to be trusted with caring for Jesus’ mother. Mary was a tremendous part of Jesus’s life and journey. Jesus designating John as her son must have been a great honor. In a way, Jesus was giving his friend John a part of himself. As with any follower of Jesus, it is our joy to serve. Jesus gave John the worthy mission of caring for his earthly mother. He also gave Mary the worthy mission of caring for John.

Let’s talk about Mary. Some of us like to focus on how Mary is said to have lived a sinless life. Others focus on her willingness to serve God by bearing and raising Jesus, but I’m not sure we talk enough about Mary’s unbelievable strength. When we think of strong people in the Bible, we think of Samson or King David, but if we are talking about real strength, in my opinion, Mary is the strongest human being in the Bible. What might it have been like for Mary to see her beloved son on the cross? We think and talk a lot about Jesus’ sacrifice, but we need to consider Mary’s sacrifice.

I have yet to meet a parent who wouldn't get on that cross in place of their child. In my brief time working as a hospital chaplain, I sat with parents who lost a child. There is no physical or emotional pain greater than the pain they experienced. Mary also experienced that pain, watching the child she carried for nine months - the child she nursed, raised, laughed with, played with, taught, and tucked in at night - there on the cross, in unimaginable pain.

As a testament to Mary's strength, it is good to remember that she is the only person in the Bible who can get Jesus to do something he doesn't want to do. Consider John 2:1-12, which is the story of the wedding at Cana:

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'" Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory - and his disciples believed in him. That was all thanks to Mary.

As the scripture shows, Mary already knew the power of being in a caring community of believers and used her strength to provide support to her community. She may also have experienced the community's support firsthand with the death of her husband. The Bible does not say when Joseph died, but we do not hear anything about him after Jesus turned twelve. The absence of Joseph from the stories of the rest of Jesus' life suggest that Mary was in fact a widow. We don't really think about her as a widow, but that's what she was. We do know, however, that Mary had two very close friends who were both named "Mary" as well. They were Mary Magdalene and Mary, the wife of Clopas. Clopas was Joseph's brother, and his wife was Mary's sister-in-law. It is likely that after Joseph's death, Clopas would have provided support and care for Joseph's wife Mary and her children.

Our scripture today points out that all three Marys were present at Jesus' crucifixion. Mary, Clopas' wife, and Mary Magdalene were there for their sister in the faith in her time of need. I imagine they were there for Mary when Joseph died as well. These Marys have probably been each other's support group for many years.

Speaking of which, everyone needs Marys in their life! Scripture reminds us of the importance of community, not only in times of joy and celebration like the wedding at Cana, but in times of deep, deep sorrow, like Jesus' crucifixion. From the cross, Jesus commissions John to be an "honorary

Mary:" a member of Jesus' mother's support network, a member of her community of faith, a member of her family.

And from the cross, Jesus further demonstrates what it looks like to live out the fifth commandment: "to honor his mother and father" by making sure she is cared for after he is physically gone. Jesus also recognizes Mary's strength and perhaps her independence by asking his mother to accept John's help and to love him as a son. In that moment, Jesus establishes that spiritual family is important. John and Mary are not blood relatives, but through their common connection with Jesus, they are bonded as family.

But when Jesus spoke the words: "Behold, this is your mother and behold, this is your son," he wasn't just talking to Mary and John. Just like when Jesus says, "Father forgive them" from the cross, that wasn't only for the people that were physically present in that moment. He said that for all of us. Likewise, when Jesus told the thief next to him that he would be with him in paradise, he wasn't just speaking to that thief: he was speaking to all of us. Jesus used that moment where he created a new family between John and Mary to teach us that community is important, and that all of us are to rely on each other as we live out our lives as people of faith.

Our church, Community Congregational United Church of Chris - this new church family - began in a similar way. Our merger is a way of us living out Jesus' invitation to be each other's mothers, sons, daughters, dads, brothers, sisters, and everything in between, as we journey forth, like Mary and John, to love and serve the Lord. There is a symbiotic relationship between generations - we need each other! When we came together, it's as if Jesus said to the Amherst congregation: "Behold, this congregation at First Church is your family now" and then to the Lorain congregation: Behold, this Amherst congregation is your family now."

By forming this combined congregation at CCUCC, we are living out Jesus' command to us spoken through Mark 3:35, which says: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." When we came together, it was because we needed each other, in a similar way that John and Mary needed each other. In a news article celebrating the 2017 merger, Pastor Brian Burke identifies the strengths of each congregation: Amherst is "filled with youth and vitality;" Lorain "has passion for mission outside church walls." Since our original foundings in 1840 and 1872, we have endured times of great difficulty. We've been through world wars, blizzards, tornadoes and now two pandemics. Yet here we are, thriving, filled with hope and anticipation as we live out our collective faith together, in Community. Behold, siblings in Christ: this is our church. Amen.