

SERMON: Words to Live By: "Woman, here is your son."

TEXT: John 19:25-27

Dorothy was the Administrative Assistant to the Dean of Students when I was in college. Dorothy was also my boss, since I was assigned to that office for my work-study job. Dorothy also became a mother away from home for me - and for many students - as she cared deeply for our well-being.

Whenever I wasn't feeling well - even if I was just extra tired from a late night of studying - Dorothy would send me back to my dorm room to sleep. She insisted that work was not as important as my health and that I shouldn't worry about getting my hours in - she'd take care of it. She would also let me do homework during office hours if I was studying for midterms or just had too much to do. Dorothy would listen to me whine and complain about all sorts of things, and she would give me advice about relationships and families and my future. She was compassionate and understanding when my life was falling apart.

And she rejoiced with me when I got a good grade or had patched things up with my boyfriend.

I wasn't even that far from home, really. Less than an hour's drive. But if I needed a mother's love in the moment, Dorothy was there.

You probably have a Dorothy in your life, too. Someone who filled the role of your mother when you were far from home or when your mother wouldn't or couldn't give you what you needed. We all can name people in our lives who are honorary family members in our hearts - not related by blood or by marriage, but related by an open door and open arms, by choice and by love.

So, it is perhaps one of the most relatable things Jesus does, when he looks at his mother and the beloved disciple standing at the foot of his cross and says, "Woman, here is your son." And to

the disciple, "Here is your mother." "And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

My guess is that Mary and John would have gravitated toward one another in their grief even without Jesus directing it. A mother who has lost a son, wanting to be close to her son's best friend, and vice versa. Together, they probably knew more about Jesus than anyone. Mary can tell John about Jesus as a boy. John can tell Mary about Jesus as a man, a minister, and a miracle-worker.

My own mother, who lost a son when he was just 19 years old, always felt especially close to his girlfriend, Marie, and his best friend, Loren. She treasured the few times that Loren would visit when he was in the area. And she was always moved by the Christmas cards with personal notes that came year after year from Marie, even after she married.

In one commentary, experts on the Gospel of John pointed out that Mary was present at the wedding in Cana when Jesus performed his first miracle and his ministry began. And the only other time she appears in the gospel is this scene at the cross, at the end of Jesus' ministry. "It, therefore, is possible to interpret Jesus' mother as representing the sweep of Jesus' incarnate ministry from beginning to end, and the beloved disciple as representing those for whom Jesus gives his life in love at his hour and who are commanded to love in the same way. When Jesus entrusts his mother and the beloved disciple to each other, then... his death [becomes] a link between the past of Jesus' ministry... and the movement of that ministry into the future...."

(The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John)

Though this is the fifth Sunday of Lent, it is the third of Jesus' final words from the cross. At this point it is not surprising that - once again - while in the throes of a slow and painful death, Jesus is thinking of others. His mother and his friend will need each other. Especially as she seems to be the only member

of his family - and John, the only one of the disciples - who have the courage to watch Jesus die.

Not only is this another example of the great compassion and love Jesus felt for others, it is also another example of how Jesus fulfilled the commandments. The fifth commandment tells us to "honor your father and your mother." Jesus, of course, was honoring his mother in making sure that she would be cared for in his absence.

Furthermore, these words of Jesus placing the care of his mother in the hands of his friend, also symbolize, according to Bible scholars, "The beginning of the creation of the new family of God." In the first chapter of John, when Jesus is introduced as the Word, we read, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12) Then when John takes Jesus' mother to his own home "at that hour," - meaning the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension - it

makes this new family a reality. (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John)

It shouldn't be hard to make the leap from these dying words of Jesus to how they are WORDS TO LIVE BY for us. And yet, it is not as easy as it sounds.

My friend Amy lost her mother a couple months ago after a fall that required surgery. Though she came through the surgery, it became clear that she would not be able to recover from it. For several days, Amy and her brother stayed by her side. But her brother's daughter refused to come. Though she lived and worked nearby, she was angry with her father. They were estranged, and because she didn't want to see him, she refused to come and say goodbye to her grandmother. Amy was furious with her niece and tried to convince her to come, but to no avail. This story is an example of how NOT to live by the dying words of Jesus.

Sometimes it is hard to honor our parents as God commands us. A mother or father who has abused or deserted their children

may not be worthy of honor. But I appreciated what I read in a book called, "No Other Gods," by Ana Levy-Lyons. "In Jewish tradition the honoring of parents and the honoring of God are closely intertwined. They are spiritual practices of honoring our Source in all its many forms." God, the Creator of all, created each one of us through our biological parents. Though they may not have parented us well - or even at all - it's where we came from, where we started. They gave us life. (Ana Levy-Lyons, "No Other Gods," 2018)

As I mentioned earlier, the words Jesus spoke, "Woman, here is your son," was the beginning of the new family of God. One of the things I love about the church - at least the churches I have been part of - is how we treat one another as family. When one church member is alone, another member will invite them to lunch. Elderly people living alone often call each other every day, just to check in. Students who are far from home find parents. My children, when they were growing up in Springfield, found

grandparents within the church when their own grandparents lived far away. "Woman, here is your son."

I know a couple who had three teenage daughters growing up in the sixties and seventies. But they took in one more teenage girl who was pregnant and had been kicked out of her home.

Remember that story about a woman who had sent a text message to the wrong number, thinking she was inviting her grandson to Thanksgiving dinner? After texting back and forth, this grandmother told the young man that the invitation was still good. So, he came to dinner. And they've been like family to one another ever since.

This is what it means for the dying words of Jesus, "Woman, here is your son," to become WORDS TO LIVE BY for us. May we live up to them, to the glory of God!

AMEN