

Good Friday 2020, Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (John 19:26,27)

A few years ago, in 1968, some workers excavating a construction site in Jerusalem made an astonishing discovery. They unearthed tombs containing ossuaries or stone boxes holding the bones of people long dead. Jewish practice around the time of Jesus had been to bury the dead but only for about a year before exhuming the remains and gathering the bones that were left. These bones were carefully washed and laid inside stone boxes called ossuaries which were then placed inside tombs cut into the stony ground. Some burial boxes would even contain the remains of withered flowers atop the bones.

In one of those ossuaries discovered in 1968 archeologists found the bones of a young man who had been crucified by being nailed to a cross, his legs cruelly broken before death by a single blow. I have seen a replica of his bones at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and in his heel bone there is a large iron nail that had been pounded through to attach him to the cross upon which he died. Perhaps a year after his death his bones had been washed and carefully placed in the box and it seems that the bones of a child aged three or four were also placed inside. Poignantly, etched to the side of his ossuary were the words, Yehohanan, son of Hagakol so that he would be remembered.

We do not know the life story of this man, neither do we know why he was crucified, but judging by the care taken with his earthly remains we do know one thing: he was loved by someone.

When a person we love dies there is a profound need to demonstrate our affection for them. The care and respect we show their mortal remains is but one way we do that, however, even before death occurs there is usually an outpouring of emotion and affection before the one who is loved leaves this world. And that affection can be two-way. Not only do family and friends show their love to the one who is dying; often the person who is to die shows their love in special ways in return. Such was the case when Jesus spoke from the cross to his mother and the disciple he loved.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, 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 to his own home.

This passage from John's Gospel is one of the traditional last 7 words from the Cross and is included as our Gospel reading for today. It tells us that besides the condemned criminal next to him, there were at least two others who looked with compassion upon Jesus as he was crucified. One was a disciple, identified only as "the disciple whom he loved," and whom we think to be John, and the other was his mother, Mary. No one will ever know what pain she must have felt that day to see her son put to death. The words of Simeon come to me as I ponder the tragedy of this scene. The words of Simeon from many years earlier when he beheld Jesus as a baby and praised God for this child before telling Mary that a sword would pierce through her own soul one day. *That day had finally come.* I think that only a mother who has lost a child to tragedy can appreciate what it must have been like for Mary. It was, perhaps, in response to her pain that Jesus asked his disciple to take care of her. It was his way of saying good-bye.

There is something in human nature that makes us want to ensure that our loved ones are taken care of when we pass on. Two ways in which we do this today are through making-out a will and through the taking-out of life

insurance. In Jesus' day it was often done by commending one's relatives to another with a direct charge to take care of them. Almost invariably, it was a trusted friend or relative who would be asked to assume the responsibility. Clearly, Jesus was concerned for his mother and it was because of that he placed her into the care of his beloved disciple. And we know that this disciple accepted his responsibilities for it is recorded that "from that hour the disciple took her to his own house." One of Jesus' last actions was to add a new member to his family, as he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" Equally importantly, Jesus extended his mother's care beyond his own family: "Woman, behold your son!" By this action there was a type of mutual adoption as both his follower and his mother became members of each other's families and expanded their care to include each other.

The fate of a woman left on her own in Jesus' day would have been rather bleak. Fortunately, Jesus' mother did not have to face this prospect alone for in one of his last actions he made her part of a wider family which would ensure that she was taken care of. "Woman, behold your son! Significantly, Jesus did not call her "mother" but rather, "woman," a much less intimate title. Could this not also signify that she now belonged to a different family and was no longer his mother in the same way? The disciple whom Jesus loved, the disciple who stayed by him at his crucifixion, became a member of Jesus' own family. As the adopted son of Mary, he became the brother of Jesus. This loyal follower became worthy of membership in Jesus' own family.

While it is true that Jesus brings mother and disciple together in a new way, this isn't just about those two people. This has significance for us, also. Although separated by 2000 years from his earthly ministry, we too are disciples of Jesus if we choose to follow him and do as he would have us do. In the action of commending his mother and his disciple into each other's care, Jesus redefined the whole notion of family. To belong to Jesus meant that one belonged to a family that was not limited by blood ties but extended beyond that to include all believers. Elsewhere, in Matthew's Gospel (12:46-50) we witness the curious scene of Mary and others identified as Jesus' own brothers coming to see him. But Jesus responds by asking, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brother! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."

We have many mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers to care for in these days of pandemic and social distancing. For many of us, the circle of family care has grown much larger very fast. We have become "caremongers" and many of us have discovered a greater capacity for love and compassion than we realized before. We are looking out for each other in our neighborhoods like never before. Teddy bears and rainbows are appearing in windows, telephone calls and prayers are multiplying among us, and there are weekly if not daily "shout-outs" for health heroes and essential workers. Churches everywhere on Easter Sunday are ringing out their bells to share their hope and their love. Our clergy and so many others are providing great nurture to individuals and families in need so that no one should be alone. Providing pastoral care to families who have lost loved ones at this time is especially hard because we are unable to gather as we want to. Ironically, the more physically isolated we become from each other, the closer we seem to become emotionally and spiritually.

We are reminded by our dying savior's concern for his faithful disciple and his mother of our own need to be a part of a family built on love in this world. The type of mutual love between mother and son which Jesus called these two into provides for us a pattern of discipleship in the world. Should not Christians also be like a family in which each depends upon the other for their needs and where each person is eager to respond to the needs of his or her brother or sister or father or mother.

Jesus' example, in the midst of his suffering on the cross, should inspire us to do the same and care for those members of the Family of God we see every day. Let us especially care for those members of the Family of God we do *not* see every day. Some people are feeling very scared right now. Sometimes you can have too much time alone and sometimes you can have too much time to think. We should all commit to telephoning and e-mailing a few people every day just to let them know that we care. This will get better.

Let us be renewed in our membership in God's family and let us re-commit ourselves to loving those other members of God's family who surround us on this Good Friday and always.

The message of Jesus to us, speaking through all of those centuries since his own death, is one that calls us to hold firm and to continue in faithfulness to our Father in Heaven.

The message of Jesus to us, speaking through all of those centuries reminds us that there will be a new tomorrow in which all things will be restored in Christ in accordance with the will of God.

The message of Jesus to us, speaking through all of those centuries asks us to love one another, even as he has loved us.

Good Friday calls us to see the Cross of Christ even as we look beyond it to his joyful resurrection on Easter Sunday.

For in Jesus' resurrection lies our hope and our promise and our story as Christians.