

Sunday 3 March 2024

Milford Baptist Church

Words of Life from the Tree of Death

Jesus' Last Words from the Cross

John 19:25-27 – The Word of Relationship and the Body of Christ

Imagine this scene.

You are in a warzone, you're in the battlefield. Things are happening all around you. Bombs, explosions, terror. Soldiers, men and women, are hurt and dying. They are crying out their last words.

Many of them are crying out for one person in particular. The one who raised them as a child, loved them unconditionally, gave of herself for them. The one who has always been there and has a special place in their hearts.

As these men and women die, they cry out, "Mother."

It's gut-wrenching. And heart-breaking to think about.

The passage we are looking at today has Jesus crying out to His mother. But as the Man of sorrows is outstretched on the Cross dying, with the sins of the world laid on him, and the criticism and mocking of the crowd piercing His heart, he doesn't cry out for what His mother can do for Him. He cries out for what He can do for His mother and His beloved disciple.

The man of sorrows, the man in the middle that we heard about last week, was concerned about the comfort and future of two of His closest relationships on earth.

We're in week three of our series 'Words of Life from the Tree of Death.'

Each Sunday leading up to Easter we're focusing on seven sayings, seven mini-sermons that Jesus made from the Cross as He was being crucified.

To quickly recap, in week one we looked at the Word of Forgiveness, where Jesus pleaded with His Heavenly Father to forgive those who were crucifying him, for they do not know what they are doing. This included us and all humanity.

In week two we looked at the Word of Salvation, where Jesus spoke to one of the thieves beside him, who repented and asked Jesus to remember Him when He came into His Kingdom. Jesus looked at him and responded, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” There was no waiting period, no conditions. Eternal salvation. Today.

Today we’re looking at the Word of Relationship.

We’ll look at this exchange between Jesus, His mother and His beloved disciple first on a relational level, then on a spiritual level, then what it means for us today, the Body of Christ, the continuation of Jesus’ ministry on earth, before we finish with a time of communion together.

Before we read the passage again, let’s pray.

John 19:25—27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

This is quite a beautiful exchange and moment from the Cross. Signs of life from circumstances of death.

Let’s look at it from a relational level, starting with Jesus’ relationship with His mother Mary.

Mary is there at the scene of her son’s death. I can’t imagine much greater pain in life than having to watch your child die. At any age. There’s something not right, something incredibly heart-breaking about it.

But she is right there. Not only her, but three other women who had followed Jesus in his ministry on earth and were standing there to show their love and support of Him in His final moments.

I think we need to take this information in a little deeper.

In a culture and society where women were often seen and treated as inferior, here are four strong women standing together in solidarity at the death of Jesus. They are inspirational figures. They have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry and are now with him in His dying moments.

Remember, most of the disciples had fled the scene. They had been concerned about their own lives and well-being, and had deserted Jesus. Except for John.

But these women were concerned for Jesus and did not desert him.

And I think it's fair to say that the one most concerned was his mother.

Mary has been there during his entire life.

Once conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb, she felt those kicks during her pregnancy,

she gave birth to him in a manger,

she had him dedicated in the Temple (where Simeon prophesied to her that a "sword will pierce her heart"),

she and her husband Joseph lost him for a time when he was twelve years old (but we won't hold that against her, as He was going about His father's business),

she was part of his first miracle, first sign of turning water into wine at the Wedding in Cana,

she was no doubt there throughout most of his ministry life.

In short, from the beginning of his earthly life, Jesus' relationship with his mother was one of the closest and dearest relationships that He had.

And she was feeling the pain of death right now seeing the life of her son slipping away right in front of her.

And he looks at her. I imagine he steadies himself to smile at her, with as much strength and purpose as he can muster from the cross.

Mother, I see you.

And here are His words to her, "Dear woman, here is your son."

You could be forgiven for thinking the thought, why is Jesus addressing her as woman? Why does he not call her mother?

I thought the same as I was preparing this message.

If we rewind John's gospel and go back to His first miracle where Jesus turned water into wine, his mother approached him and said, "They have no more wine?" In other words, Help son!

Can you recall his response?

It's in John chapter 2 verse 4:

"Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come."

So this is not the first time he has addressed his mother in this way.

If we move a little bit forward in John's gospel to chapter 8 and look at the woman caught in adultery, once all the people have left her,

Jesus straightens up and addresses her with these words, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?"

This is the same word 'woman' that He uses as he addresses His mother at the wedding and then from the Cross.

So why does He use it? What's the significance?

The Greek word is *gone* ("go-nee"), from which we get the word 'gynaecology.' The meaning of it is the universal term for 'women,' but it was also used frequently to show honour and respect to someone.

It's a term of endearment.

So when Jesus addresses the woman caught in adultery with this term, he is honouring her and not shaming her. He is lifting her up, showing love, care and tenderness to her.

When Jesus addresses his mother with this term, he is showing the same love, care and tenderness to her.

This is a sign of Jesus that sets him apart from men of that culture – tenderness and respect towards His mother and other women in general.

It doesn't matter what you've done, like the woman caught in adultery, or how the culture might look down on you and see you as inferior – in Jesus' eyes you are seen, you are loved and you are respected.

This is how Jesus looks and sees his mother from the cross.

This is a picture of Jesus' gentleness and concern.

"Dear woman, here is your son."

Jesus is telling his mother, as I, your oldest son, will not be around, here is your son, John. John is not a replacement for Jesus. Instead, Jesus is taking care of his mother's needs from the Cross.

Mary is a widower. We don't know for how long she has been one, but now that her eldest son is dying, Jesus is fulfilling that role by taking care of his mother's needs – financially and relationally.

A widow was often marginalised in that society and it would have been difficult for Mary to support herself. She would have struggled to make ends meet and provide for herself.

Throughout the ages, it has often been a struggle for widowers to support themselves.

Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of Abraham Lincoln, was left so poor and broken after his assassination that she was unable to preserve her family home. In desperation and vulnerability, she approached Congress for years to receive a suitable stipend based on her husband's service and sacrifice for his country.

The harder she tried to get her husband's small pension, the more resistance she faced because a woman engaged in politics was viewed as inappropriate.

Sadly, it was only shortly before her death that she was approved a small pension to live on.

This is just one example of the struggle life can be for widows.

God knows this struggle and here on the cross Jesus is addressing it for Mary.

Jesus is saying to her, "John will take care of you. He will make sure that you do not suffer or struggle financially. He will make sure you don't have any burdens to carry."

But more than that, Jesus is saying, "John will be there relationally for you. John will look after you. John, the one I love, will show that same love to you."

This is incredible. Love in action.

The furthest thought from Jesus's mind is himself or his pain. Instead he is focusing on Mary and her pain. Mary and her future. Mary and her relationship with John.

I think we need to pause and thank God that we have a Saviour who looks at us and sees us, who is focused on our pain, our future, our relationships. He is not distant. He enters into our circumstances and meets us where we are at.

Thanks be to God!

Let's look at John now, the disciple Jesus loved.

Jesus looks at John in the same way He has always looked at him. With love and care, and says to him, "*Here is your mother.*"

John and Jesus enjoyed a special and close relationship. He was one of the inner circle of disciples, together with his brother James and Peter.

But John wrote his gospel and he referred to himself as Jesus' beloved disciple or the disciple whom Jesus loved.

I don't think he was gloating or showing off, but rather just saying that he had a personal, close and loving relationship with Jesus.

John has been there since the beginning of his ministry too. He's walked with him. He's likely very close to his mother Mary too.

But Jesus is not just telling him to stay close to Mary, he's saying to him, "She is now your mother. Watch over her. Look after her for me."

Wow, what an honour this must have been for John.

And we know he took it seriously, as the text says that *from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

He provided for all her needs and loved her like a son.

Here's my question: Why did Jesus choose John to do this? Aside from the fact that He loved him deeply, why give this honour and responsibility to John?

I wonder if this part of the reason why was that while all the other disciples fled the scene and deserted Jesus in his time of greatest need, John stayed.

He showed the type of courage and endurance required to fulfil the responsibility of caring for Mary.

As author Stu Epperson Jr. writes:

As he stands by Jesus in His death, John now becomes Mary's son, to stand by her in her final days. Through eyes of anguished pain, Jesus sees

one lone disciple there by his mother – His beloved disciple who no doubt risked it all just to be near his Lord at this moment. As Christ fulfils His Levitical role as firstborn son to dispatch care for His mother, so John fulfils his role as a “born again” son in his care for the widow. (55)

The pairing of John and Mary together was not an accident. It was intentional by Jesus. If you think about it, Mary was the first person to look into the eyes of Jesus when she gave birth to him in Bethlehem.

John was the last to gaze into his eyes on the island of Patmos, when Jesus revealed Himself and His revelation for the church to him.

This hints at the deeper spiritual level of this exchange, which we’ll look at now.

Up until this point there have been four different people who Jesus has spoken to from the Cross.

His Heavenly Father – the one whom He has shared all eternity with and who gave Him the assignment from eternity.

The thief on the cross – the one who moments away from death, repents and is promised salvation. He represents all of fallen humanity who Jesus dies for.

His mother Mary – the one who God chose to bear the Saviour of the world, who would save the lost.

And his beloved disciple John – the one who represents the body of Christ, the church, the continuation of His ministry on earth.

God the Father appointed Jesus;

Jesus died for the thief on the Cross;

Mary gave birth to the Saviour Jesus;

and John represents Jesus’ body, the church, on earth.

In the coming together of Mary and John – we see a human and divine partnership. We see a God who loves the world and wants to save those in the world.

The earthly uniting of Mary and John occurs before the divine separation of Father and Son.

Can you see what Jesus is doing? It’s quite amazing when you think about it.

With great care, love and intention, Jesus is connecting His earthly family together as He Himself enters into the divine work of redemption. He is connecting the living, while He is dying for the lost.

The formation and purpose of the church is happening right here.

God's family. At the foot of the Cross we can all find our spiritual family. We don't need to be lonely. We are together in Christ.

God's family are charged with the caring of widows and orphans. The marginalised in society.

James 1:27 says this:

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Jesus' Church, His body, is ultimately about caring for the least, the last and the lost.

And in this moment from the Cross, Jesus showed this by uniting his mother, a widow, with John, his disciple.

By taking her into his home and caring for her, John was ministering to Mary.

And this was the beginning of the church.

What does this mean for us?

As we come to finish and respond with communion together, we are meant to carry on ministering to others in our lives.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called and commissioned to minister to the widows and orphans in our community. The least, the last and the lost.

To the people right in front of us.

Jesus' words of relationship are to us, the Body of Christ. We are meant to be in relationship with others. Pointing them to Jesus in their midst. Ministering to their needs. Caring sacrificially. Telling people about Jesus. Sharing the gospel in love, word and deed.

Jesus could very much look down towards us and tell us, here is someone for you to see and look after. To care for their needs.

Here is the least, last and lost in your life.

For me, I have a heart for people who are in or come from broken homes. I don't know if it's growing or not, but it seems like so many children nowadays are living without their mother and father in the same home.

There are blended families. There are solo-parent families. There are children growing up without their fathers fully present in their lives.

This is true for children in my son's tennis team.

As well as for other children at our children's schools.

And it's also happening within my own family of origin where relationships have unfortunately broken down, and my nieces and nephew no longer have their mum and dad together.

It breaks my heart. I wish there was more I could do. And maybe there is.

Maybe God is calling me to reach out more to children in these circumstances. Maybe there's something we as a church can do. No doubt there are children in broken homes in the Milford community. No doubt there are those who need love, care and the gospel in action.

There is a song I quite like called 'Hosanna.'

In the bridge there is this haunting line: "Break my heart for what breaks yours, everything I am for your Kingdom's cause, as I walk from nothing to eternity."

Let me ask you,

What breaks your heart? What or who is it that God has put on you to intercede for, to show love and compassion towards, to embrace, to be Christ's body, His hands and His feet?

I want us to pause here and talk to God about who He has put on our hearts. Who has He told us personally to care for? Who as a church can we collectively minister towards?

And if you don't have any specific people or a person who comes to mind, ask God to lay that person or those people on your heart.

Let's pray for God to break our heart for what breaks His.

Father, we are asking you a very specific and dangerous prayer. Because once we ask you and you tell us, we are responsible. So we don't ask this lightly, but in all sincerity. Break our hearts for what breaks yours. Show us the people you

have laid on our hearts to care and minister to. Reveal to us as a church the people or groups of people we can support. The least, the last and the lost. Like John, give us the courage to respond to your call. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Friends, this exchange between Jesus, his mother and his beloved disciple is a beautiful picture of Christ and His church. Not focused on His own pain, in his final moments He focused on uniting them together. On the Cross He was and is doing His salvation work, and He is calling His people to serve and love one another and those for whom He died.

These are his Words of Life from the Tree of Death. The Word of Relationship: *"Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."*

Communion

As we enter into a time of Communion now with Jesus and each other as a church family, let's remain focused on that wooden Cross.

Jesus willingly let himself be crucified. He willingly went through the pain and agony for us.

Not only did He use His last words to bring people together, He showed His great love for us by going to and staying on the Cross.

Why? Because He loves us and wants to commune with us. He wants to be with us. And thanks to His sacrifice we can.

Communion is about remembering this sacrifice.

We eat the bread to remember His body that was broken for us.

We drink the juice to remember His blood that was spilt for us.

He made a way for us to be made right with our Heavenly Father.

Together as His family.

Let's pause now and examine our hearts before Him.

If there is anything in our lives keeping us from His presence, let's confess it now.

Father, we confess that we are sinful and broken. As we examine our hearts and lay them before you, we ask for your forgiveness and your strength. Thank you for breaking strongholds in our lives and creating a clean heart within us.

May we live our lives pleasing to you. Amen.

Now that we have confessed our sin before Him, we are ready to take the bread and the cup. If you are here today and a follower of Jesus, you are welcome to take Communion. If you have not made the decision to follow Jesus, I ask that you not take Communion, but would be happy to talk with you after the service.

Once you get your bread and juice, please hold them and we will eat and drink together as a family.

The Bread

As we take the bread representing Your life that was broken for us, we remember and celebrate Your faithfulness to us and to all who will receive You. We can't begin to fathom the agonizing suffering of Your crucifixion. Yet You took that pain for us. You died for us! Thank You, Jesus. Thank You for Your extravagant love and unmerited favour. Thank You that Your death gave us life—abundant life now, and eternal life forever. As You instructed Your disciples, we, too, receive this bread in remembrance of You.

Friends, let's eat together.

The Cup

And in the same way, as we take this cup representing Your blood poured out from a splintered cross, we realize that You were the supreme sacrifice for all our sin: past, present, and future. Because of Your blood shed for us, and Your body broken for us, we can be free from the power and penalty of sin. Thank You for Your victory over death. You took the death that we deserved. You took our punishment. Your pain was indeed my gain. And today we remember and celebrate the precious gift of life You gave us through the blood that You spilled.

Friends, let's drink together.

Let's pray.

Lord, each time we take communion, we want to recommit our lives, hearts, thoughts, everything to You. Fill us today with Your Powerful Holy Spirit. As we leave this place, help us to hold this fresh remembrance and the story that never grows old close to our hearts. Help us to share its message faithfully as You give opportunity.

We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.