
The Third Word from the Cross

"Behold your Mother"

John 19:25-27

The Third Sunday of Lent – February 27, 2005

Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

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Let's play a word association game; you know – I'll say a word and then you think about the first thing that comes to mind. So I say "*big*" and you think "*small*;" I say "*black*" and you think "*white*;" I say "*jumbo*," and you think "*shrimp*;" I say "*amazing*" and you think "*grace*." Got it? Well, the word is "*church*." What's the first thing that comes to mind?

I'm pretty sure that some of you thought "*Northway*," and that's good, after all for many of you here this morning Northway is your church home. And I suspect that some of you thought "*Christ*," and that's a good theological connection. I fear that some of you thought "*boring*," and we're sympathetic – that's why we're starting "*The Way*" the Sunday after Easter a worship service with a different style, a different vernacular and a different setting. And I'll bet that some of you thought of a building where something important happened to you spiritually along the way: a decision of faith, a baptism, a wedding, an infant dedication, or a funeral. That emotional connection to a sacred space is important.

Right now, whenever I hear the word "*church*" I tend to think of an "*organization*." You see, I'm in the final stretch of a term as one of the moderators of our denomination, the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*). For two years now I've been occupied with Administrative Committees, General Boards, structural renewal, organizational dysfunction and personnel replacement. For two years now I've been a church bureaucrat. I've made more trips to our denominational headquarters in Indianapolis than I care to remember, and I've spent more time with lawyers and accountants than I ever imagined that I would have as a minister. And so when I hear the word "*church*," right now I see flow charts, think budgets and start to draw new organizational designs.

I wonder, did anybody here think "*family*" when I said "*church*"? Biblically we all probably should have. In fact, I think that's what Christ's third word from the cross was all about. When Jesus told Mary to behold the Apostle John as her son, and for John to behold Mary as his mother, I'm convinced that what He was doing was giving us His perspective on what He wanted the church to be.

Surprisingly, the actual word "*church*" appears only a handful of times on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels. But Jesus was constantly talking about His disciples, that community of faithful men and women who followed Him. Jesus

clearly intended the creation of a people. It was part of His purpose to form a group of folks who had been transformed and who were being transforming through their relationship with Him. And the way that Jesus thought about this group of people was as a family.

Consider the episode from the ministry of Jesus that we read about in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 12:46-50. Jesus was in a house teaching when His mother and brothers came looking for Him. Yes, the Gospels tell us that Jesus had physical kin: four brothers named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas, and at least two sisters who are not named in the Biblical text (Matthew 13:55). So, they showed up one day where Jesus was teaching and sent word in that they needed to see Him. In the Gospel of John we're told that the brothers of Jesus didn't believe in Him (7:5), and in the Gospel of Mark we're told that they thought that Jesus was *"out of His mind"* and needed to be forcibly *"restrained"* (Mark 3:21). And so when their request came to Jesus to come outside to see them, Jesus asked, *"Who are my mother and my brothers?"* And then looking around at His disciples, Jesus said, *"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother"*

The book of Proverbs tells us that there are friends who stick closer to us than our nearest kin (18:24). And from the cross, Jesus simply reasserted this truth by entrusting the care of his physical mother to that of His best spiritual friend, the Apostle John. Jesus thought of the community of friends who gathered about Him as His family. And so, not surprisingly, when the church began to grow one of the primary ways that it talked and thought about itself was as a family of faith, the household of God. This is why Paul told Timothy to relate to his fellow Christians as members of his family: to older men as if they were his father, to younger men as if they were his brothers, to older women as if they were his mother, and to younger women as if they were his sisters.

Now, some have seen all of this in a rather sinister way. In fact, some scholars have gone so far as to talk about what they call Jesus Christ's *"subversion of the family."* They point to some of the things that Jesus said as evidence that He thought that the spiritual claim of the church has priority over the physical claim of the family. For instance there's this *"hard saying"* from Matthew 10:37-39: *"He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

When I was in high school it was this very text that caused one of my best friends to reject Christianity. After months of sharing my faith with him, Jim finally agreed to consider the claims of Christ by reading a Gospel. He got as far as Matthew chapter 10 before throwing it back at me saying that he wanted nothing to do with somebody who would say anything like that about his family. And I'll admit that it stumped me back then too.

Now I understand something about Jesus' use of hyperbole as a teacher, and His verdict approach to decisions of faith: the way that He deliberately positioned people before stark and sometimes even shocking choices. And I also understand the way that Scripture always has to interpret Scripture within the Canon, and how that inevitably leads us into the mystery of paradox – all

those seemingly contradictory statements that are nevertheless equally true. And what Christ said about family is certainly one of these paradoxes.

After all the Jesus who said that unless we *“hate”* our families we cannot be His disciples (Luke 14:26-27) is the same Jesus who committed the care of His mother to his best friend as He was dying on the cross. I think that the way that Jesus talked about the family of faith makes it more an addition to rather than a subtraction from our natural families. It wasn't so much an either/or arrangement that Jesus was setting up as it was a both/and reality to which He was pointing. In fact, I'd argue that it's finally the comparison between these two families we find ourselves in as Christians, our birth family and our second birth family, that Jesus was trying to establish with His third word from the cross. I think that what He wanted was for us as His followers to relate to each other as brothers and sisters. I think that He wanted His church to act in family sorts of ways. And as I've tried to think through what this means for us here at Northway, one of my best helpers has been the late Jane Howard.

For 16 years Jane worked for Life magazine as a writer and an editor. In the 1970's she began writing books as well as teaching writing as a guest lecturer at schools like the University of Iowa, the University of Georgia, Yale University and Columbia. Her third book was called Families, and in it she identified what she called some of the *“earmarks common to good families.”* And I find that they're a helpful grid through which to push the family of faith.

- First of all Jane Howard said that *“good families must have a chief, a heroine, or a founder – someone around whom others cluster.”* Northway's does, and it's clearly Jesus Christ. We find our connections with each other through our connections with Him. This is why the only question we ask you when you present yourself for church membership is about your relationship with Jesus Christ. He's our Lord, is He yours too? He's our Savior, is He yours too? And if He is, then that makes us family.
- Jane Howard said that *“good families are fortresses with lots of windows and doors to the outside world.”* They're safe and secure places to be, and at the same time they are always open for others to find their way in. They balance the inward mandate of belonging with the outward mandate of welcoming. Francis Schaeffer always emphasized the fact in his teaching on Christian love that we are called as the church to love each other in here as well as love our neighbor out there. He said that Christian love becomes ugly when it becomes exclusive and selfish (135). And so we have to carefully balance the care and attention we lavish on each other here in the community of faith with an equally passionate commitment to caring for and loving people outside our walls.
- Jane Howard said that *“good families know how to deal squarely with direness.”* Twenty years ago Dennis Sawyer, the pastor of an inner city church in Chicago, wrote an article for the journal Leadership in which he argued that every church needs a bag lady. His was a woman named Katie

who usually showed up each Sunday morning half way through the worship service wearing three or four dresses and talking out loud to herself. She would make her way down the center aisle to a pew near the front with all of her possessions in the two bags she carried with her wherever she went dangling from her hands. At her pew Katie would set down her bags, kneel, cross herself, pick up her bags, squeeze into the pew and nest. And Dennis said that over time Katie taught his church more about what it means to be a family than any sermon he ever preached. Every family has its oddballs and its needy, and we bear them gladly. Perfection is not the requirement for membership in a family. We eventually learn what we can reasonably expect from each other, occasionally surprise each other by giving or getting more than that, and love each other even when we give or get less. Families don't kick members out; they carry each other in love even when to do so hurts and costs.

- Jane Howard said that “*good families are affectionate.*” I regularly field complaints about how noisy our sanctuary is before worship. People who come here thinking that they will get a few moments of silent reflection in a hushed reverent worship space before the prelude begins are going to be sorely disappointed. And that’s because people are greeting, and hugging, and laughing, and visiting during that gathering time, and although I’m a silence and solitude kind of guy, I’ve come to the place that I actually celebrate the noise. After all, it’s the sound of love.
- Jane Howard said that “*good families find some way to connect with posterity.*” She said that we “*need to regularly see and talk and laugh with people who can expect to outlive us by 20 years or so.*” I love children’s sermon time. I love to see kids streaming forward from all over the sanctuary to spend some time each Sunday morning with one of the ministers on the front steps. I love their noise. I love their energy. I love their comfortableness with this place. And I love the way that you respond to them and the chaos so positively. Somebody has said that nobody can be called a disciple of Jesus Christ if children are afraid to play outside his front door. And the same thing can be said of a church. The fact that children run to the front of this church every Sunday morning says more about who we are than almost anything else we do.
- And finally, Jane Howard said that “*good families honor their elders. The wider the age, the stronger the tribe.*” Some time ago Philip Yancey wrote an editorial for Christianity Today in which he explained his reason for not belonging to a megachurch. He said that in a large church we get to choose our companions, but in a smaller church our companions are chosen for us. He said, “*given the choice, I tend to hang out with people like me: people who have a college degree, drink dark roast Strabucks Coffee, listen to Classical music and buy their cars based on EPA gas mileage ratings.*” But in a smaller church we are forced to “*rub shoulders with everybody else.*” A club

is an association of similar people who choose to be together; but a family is an association of dissimilar people who find their lives connected by a shared identity. I really like being in a church where things are just as likely to be disrupted by a baby's cry as by the squeal of a hearing aid. In this family all generations are represented and welcomed.

To Mary, Jesus said, "*Behold your son.*" To John, Jesus said, "*Behold your mother.*" From the cross Jesus defined His church as a family. As you know, families can be dysfunctional, demanding and draining. But they can also be affirming, life-giving and redemptive. And it's in the interplay of those two realities that we discover grace.

Sources

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