

"Woman, Here is Your Son ... Here is Your Mother"

*A meditation offered by Wendy Claire Barrie,
Director, Children and Family Ministries,
at The Three Hours service, April 6, 2012.
Good Friday.
Based on John 19: 25b-27.*

Just before Lent, Buddy mentioned to me in an off-hand way that I would be preaching on one of the last seven words at the Good Friday three-hour service. I waited a moment to see if he was joking, and when it appeared that he was not, I asked if I could have this word. That Jesus' mother would be there at the foot of the cross is one of the few things about this day that make sense to me.

There is nothing unintentional in the Gospel of John. Every word is carefully chosen and the language is rich, layered in meaning, filled with paradox, poetry and power. This gospel is written, says the evangelist, "that you may believe." And what are we to believe? In John we are not given facts about the historical Jesus; we are given the mystery of God incarnate. "The Word was born a wordless child" begins the story of the life of Jesus that our Sunday School children hear each Lent. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And so we meet God, we enter into relationship with God, through Jesus. Relationship is what is most important to John. Family ties are not important, offices and titles are of no consequence, even names have little significance. No, what is important in this gospel is relationship to Jesus, and it is available to everyone, equally, regardless of gender or ethnic identity or biology. Listen:

"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."

Woman, Jesus calls her. It sounds impolite to us, but it wouldn't have been unusual then—except that it was his own mother Jesus was speaking to. Mary is not named in John's gospel, and she appears only twice. We never learn the identity of the Beloved Disciple; there is no scholarly consensus. "Good Friday is not the first Mother's Day," the eminent preacher Fleming Rutledge reminds us. Something else is happening here. Jesus is creating a new kind of family, one to which all who follow him can belong. This is the Beloved Community. Jesus who loves us brings us together. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Our relationship with Jesus binds us together in community. Jesus gives only one commandment in this

gospel: "... that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The mother of Jesus plays a symbolic role in John's gospel, but I am going to ask you to set that aside now and consider Mary. Jesus certainly had a mother. Not Mary of the Christmas cards and carols. To my mind, there was nothing meek or mild about her. Even if there was no journey to Bethlehem, no star, no manger, Jesus had a mother, and I choose Mary who was strong, brave, and bold. What if the *Magnificat* really was her song? God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." If Mary, young, poor, uneducated, a woman, had these subversive thoughts two thousand years ago, then maybe Jesus was as much his mother's son as his father's.

Mary didn't need angels and magi and extravagant, impractical gifts to know her baby was special. In every birth there is the possibility of God-with-us. We come close to God in a way that we couldn't imagine before this moment. The mother lived, her child thrived and grew, and that in itself was a miracle.

Jesus must have been a child who was adored. Last night Edward preached on Jesus' commandment to love one another, and he cited a recent article in the *New York Times* by Diane Ackerman in which she discusses the science of attachment—interpersonal neurobiology. She writes, "Brain scans show synchrony between the brains of mother and child; but what they can't show is the internal bond that belongs to neither alone, a fusion in which the self feels so permeable it doesn't matter whose body is whose. Wordlessly, relying on the heart's semaphores, the mother says all an infant needs to hear, communicating through eyes, face and voice... A baby's first attachments imprint its brain." That powerful mother-love sets the pattern of a lifetime. Jesus loves us so well not only because he is beloved of God, but because he was also beloved of Mary.

Of course it does not necessarily follow that Jesus was especially easy to raise. Parenting a gifted child is a challenge. If we go by what we learn in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark, or by our own experience being a parent or having a parent, we can guess that Mary may not have always understood Jesus or agreed with his choices. She must have worried about him, been hurt and disappointed by him, maybe as often as she was filled with love and pride in the man he had become. Did she know where this path would lead him? And even if she guessed, what could she do?

The woman who stood at the foot of the cross was probably about my age. She watched her son suffer and die a brutal, senseless death, something no parent should ever witness. I don't know what it was like for her that day, but I can imagine. I have a son. I would lay down my life for him.

Priest, mother and writer Barbara Cawthorne Crafton has written a meditation on this word, which I would like to share with you.

This is not my son.

You are my son.
This is my son's friend. He is about your age.
He is strong and vital, as you were
just this morning,
before they began to do
what they are doing to you now,
Before they drove nails into your hands
as if they were blocks of wood,
before this happened to my baby.
Now, we stand and watch,
your best friend and I. I cannot bear to see,
but neither can I bear to leave.
And neither can he. And so, I do love him.
I love him for staying.
So I will not argue with you now about this.
I won't allow our last talk
to be an argument.
I want so much to help you get through this
it tastes like blood in my mouth.
And there isn't anything else I can do to help you since
they won't let me come near you,
let alone touch you.
They won't even let me give you a drink.
I can't even brush the hair out of your eyes.
You are going quickly now.
This cannot last much longer.
So all right. When this is over,
It will be John and I.
I will love him, because he will remember you.
And you will be all I'll want to talk about,
for a long time after this is over,
long after most people think it's time I got over it.
But there was a time you lived in me:
I held you safe right here,
under my heart,
in the place where you have an open wound.
You were part of my body then.
I would be part of yours now.
I would leap
to take your place up there.
I would laugh
if they drove nails into my hands

*instead of into yours.
I would look down at you
looking up and I would see your chest
heave with your crying and mine would
heave with my failing breathing and I would
shout "He lives!" and send my last breath to the sky.
Thanksgiving.*

"Mother, this is your son" by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

A mother's love for her child... "For God so loved the world..."

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

I wonder how Mary learned to reconcile her son's death with his life, or even if she did. We have had so many more years for reflection, and it's still hard for us. Following this new commandment, to love one another as Jesus loves us, is the work of a lifetime. Let it be our pattern. May we become the Beloved Community. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." I know Mary would want us to honor her son's life with our lives. And so we shall, and so we do, today and tomorrow and for all the days and years to come, now and forever. Amen.