



ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

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“Woman, Here Is Your Son . . . Here Is Your Mother”

A meditation preached on March 29, 2013

Good Friday: The Three Hour Service from 12 noon to 3 o'clock

Based on John 19: 25b-27

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.

For Christian people death is real, painful, and has consequences. Sometimes the death is in the ordinary course of life or at the end of a long chronic illness or even a sudden attack at the end of a long life. It is still painful and has consequences. Other times the death is untimely, when a child precedes a parent in death, and it is also real, painful, and has consequences.

When Jesus was presented in the temple soon after his birth, the Gospel of Luke records that prophet Simeon blessed the Holy Family and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

The untimely death of a child before a parent is always a sword piercing the soul of the mother and the father. I have worked at two different times in my ministry in neo-natal intensive care units and witnessed death up close. I have also worked in communities where the untimely death of the children was often after they had been judged a danger to society, and death came at the hands of the authorities. It is easy to judge one group of bereaved parents as worthy and the other group of bereaved parents as unworthy. And yet we are not called to judge but to love. The same sword pierces their souls and threatens to unmake them.

Those of you who know me well may find it difficult to believe, but I once completed a thirty-day silent retreat following the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. The entire third week was devoted to prayer and contemplation of the events of Holy Week, and on the seventh day of the third week one is counseled to contemplate the entire Passion again. Finally one is instructed to consider the loneliness of Mary, whose grief and fatigue were so great, then also the loneliness of the disciples.

Sister Barbara, the nun who gave me direction throughout the retreat, asked me to imagine what was the first thing Mary had to do following the crucifixion. I really could not imagine. I thought I had failed the retreat when I just could not come up with the answer. And as the hour drew near to meet with my director, I made up a response that I thought might at least entertain Barbara, who very aware of the importance of the practical matters of running a large household. I began by admitting that my prayer had not been particularly productive and that I could not imagine what was the first thing Mary had to do following the crucifixion, but I guessed that someone had to do the dishes from the last supper.

With a tender maternal gaze that I had not yet seen from this elderly nun—who spoke with a thick German accent that I associated more with Nazis in World War II movies

than the nuns I had known—Barbara said, “No, Mary did not have to do the dishes. Mary had to forgive God for what he did to her son.”

Indeed it is the first thing any of us has to do after the dull sword of death has pierced our souls. Whether the deceased is judged by our society as worthy or not worthy, whether the death is untimely or in the ordinary course of life, each of us who survives must forgive God for the loss of our loved ones. And how do we do this?

Well, first of all it does not happen all at once, and we cannot do it all by ourselves. We need the community. We need help with the practical matters and the spiritual matters. Community is not about bloodlines but love and loving service to each other in times of need. And there is no greater time of need than when your soul has been pierced by the dull sword of death. This is why Jesus commends his mother to his disciple and commends the disciple to his mother. They needed each other. For the time being, community takes the place of faith and supports the bereaved until the important work of reconciliation with God can be accomplished.

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