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“Here Is....”
The Seven Last Words of Christ: The Third Word
John 19:25-27

New American Standard Bible ...standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” 27 Then He said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” From that hour the disciple took her into his own household.

The Good Friday traditional focus on the “seven last words of Jesus” has long been powerful and poignant theme for prayer and preaching. And yet that tradition can also be just a bit misleading, can’t it? For what we have in this tradition of the “seven last words” is similar to what happens when we combine the Christmas stories from the three gospels that have such accounts into a single beautiful narrative that includes angels and shepherds and wise men and the light that the darkness will not overcome: For while beautiful indeed, we also thereby gloss over the very real differences in how Matthew, Luke, and John convey the momentousness of the news, and we may fail to see how very distinctive the audiences they were writing to were, missing, therefore, those nuances that can illumine our faith. It is the same with these “seven last words” that we cite and recite on this most poignant day of the Christian year. The narrative before us comes from all four of the gospels (for Mark and Matthew have the same words), but when we combine these sources in this way even though we may have the advantage of hearing from all four of the gospel chroniclers of Jesus’s life, we also have the disadvantage of, again, not seeing the subtle differences of emphasis or nuance

that indicate each writer's intended audience. We may fail, for example, to see that Matthew's gospel likens the ministry of Jesus to that of Moses, reminding us thereby that Jesus was a good and faithful Jew, weaned on the teachings of a God of unconditional love. Or we may fail to see that Luke's interpretation of Jesus is one that clearly is aimed primarily **not** at Jewish readers but at the "Gentiles" – which is to say, ultimately you and me! – who wouldn't know the word messiah from matzoh, and yet whom Luke knows are also the recipients of God's unconditional love manifested first in the Torah and now in Jesus. Or we may fail to see Mark, impatient and urgent Mark, and how in his telling of the story Jesus's patience was time and time again sorely tried by the denseness of His disciples. For you see the gospel writers were not simply "reporters" – for if they were, they weren't very good ones for their "facts" differ at so many points. But they were not reporters, they were, as the earliest church tradition has it, "evangelists," each writing more than two generations after Jesus's earthly life and each wanting to show a different aspect of the good news about this man and the message and the truth that He bore.

So, on this Good Friday, as we focus on Jesus's third word from the cross, let us therefore look more closely at the gospel of John in which it is found – for John, too, is writing with a very distinctive understanding of who Jesus is and who God is. John has, to use some jargon, "the highest Christology" of any of the four gospels," and it is to his gospel that we can trace, for example, the roots of the doctrine of the Trinity that would be fully formulated a few centuries later. John is also the gospel where, unlike, say, Mark's portrayal, Jesus is, shall we say, shown to be fully in control. There is little in John where Jesus is posing questions; the Jesus of John's gospel doesn't ask "*Who do*

people say that I am?" but rather through His beautiful "I am" statements John's Jesus is more concerned with formulating and offering *answers*, life-giving *answers*, to those oh-so-perennial human questions: questions like what IS the real sustenance, the real bread of our existence; what sort of light IS it that allows us to see fully and completely, and so on. Perennial, persistent, sometimes agonizing human questions to which Jesus, as John portrays him, is devoted to answering. This is the Jesus who is direct, unambiguous and who takes pains to tell His followers what the truth is and what they should do about it. John's Jesus is like Captain Picard: "*Make it so.*"

So given that context and the emphases that John's rendering of Jesus has, how does this third word speak to us? I have always counseled a simple three-fold rule for doing Bible study: **First**, find out what the text says. This means that unless you read the Greek or Hebrew (and actually even then, too), you need to read several translations to get a sense of what is actually being said. Every translation is interpretation; that's not some ideological contention, it's simply the nature of language. **Second**, ask what does the passage *mean*? Knowing the most accurate words is not enough, and the other tools of Biblical study can help you understand what those words *meant* to the first hearers, how that meaning has changed as language has changed over the millennia, etc. And finally, the **third** rule is this: **So what?** It is with this question that Bible study become faith formation. For if a scripture isn't challenging you and calling you to change, reinforce, or deepen your behavior in some way then you haven't let the scripture really get to you. If you can't answer that "So what" question in some way about a given scripture, then you'd best pass along to another scripture where the Word might be more apt to find you and convict you.

Let us follow, then, our three-fold set of questions. First, what does this scripture from John say? Well, it is actually rather extraordinary. Note initially how, in keeping with the whole tone of John's Jesus, His utterances here are so beautifully formulated. This is actually a clue to its importance and meaning, for think about it: can you truly or easily imagine someone dying in such a hideously painful way speaking such beautiful and carefully crafted language? While we can't imagine it for ourselves, John's rendering here is actually telegraphing to us that Jesus's instructions are of the utmost urgency and importance. That urgency is communicated with phrasing that defies easy translation because Jesus means to **interrupt** and to offer an **imperative** which can be found in one little phrase. Some translators render it as "**Behold!**" Others have it as "**Lo!**" (with the exclamation mark). One translation takes a different tack and begins that verse simply with the one-word sentence "**Woman!**" and only then goes on to say "*Here is your son.*" In other words, what the verse says here is that Jesus **urgently** and **imperatively** intends to **interrupt** the routine of those closest to him. He means to say that from now on they are each responsible for seeking to assuage one another's pain, of bearing each other's burdens, of sharing each other's joys. Jesus is interrupting and up-ending the lines that may have separated them and is now making them into one family.

And now, to recur to our second Bible study question, what does that **mean**? When my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, and I lived in Hawaii we were privileged to pastor two churches, hers a Chinese ethnic church and mine a Japanese ethnic church. But both churches were imbued – as was the whole culture – with a traditional Hawaiian

notion of “hana`i” “Hana`i” Say it with me. It is a term that denotes family-by-choice. You can find the term in both obituaries and birth announcements with references to a hana`i mother or hana`i uncle or hana`i sister and so on. Because the Hawaiian culture, at its best, knows that family can indeed come by choice and those folks thereby made a part of a family are just as real a part of that family as those made so through biology. **That** is what Jesus is getting at here with his imperatively urgent instructions to his mother and his friend: You **ARE** now family. Not sort-of-family, not “like family,” but family. Period. Eugene Petersen’s always-provocative translation of the Bible captures the extraordinary nature of Jesus’s imperative when he translates the closing words of this passage this way: *“From that moment the disciple accepted her as his own mother.”* Not “as if” she were his mother, but **AS** his mother. Period. Hana`i family created. Barriers broken. New creation accomplished. Done.

And now, finally, what of my third rule for Bible study, the one that moves us from antiquarian interest to faithful follow-through: **So what?** So what? What does Jesus’s extraordinary imperative to his mother and his friend mean for us? Well, I am reminded of the powerful words of the writer of the letter to the Ephesians – Paul or more likely one of his students – who penned these words not long before John wrote his gospel: *“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God....”* (Ephesians 2:14,19 NRSV). I want you to notice something about both these words and Jesus’s words from the cross: **they are a done deal**. These are

not proposals. They are not something for us to study and report back on. They are not advice. They are not suggestions. No, they are **description** and they are **imperative**: Christ **has** broken down the walls and **has** made us hana`i family. Period. Like it or not. Done. For you see,

- Behold! – God through Christ has shown us that the walls that we think are important, that we use to divide people, are walls which Christ has already dismantled and which we are invited - no, we are commanded! – to walk over the rubble of those destroyed walls and greet one another with love and not as abstractions or people to be judged.
- Behold! – God through Christ has shown us that, unbelievable and annoying as it sometimes is, we **are** all hana`i family: Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, the tattooed and the pierced and the purple-haired, the young and the old, the lovers of the latest praise music and the cherishers of the good ol' hymns, even Coloradans and Texans.
- Behold! – God through Christ has shown us that we **are** one family whatever our orientations, whatever our race, whatever our class, whatever our immigration status, whatever our gender and we therefore need to be talking with and treating each other with the same respect as we would treat our own mothers.
- Behold! – God through Christ has shown us that as challenging as it is, gun owners and gun despisers live in the very same household and need to find ways to come together, to get past the slogan-slinging and the demonizing of one another to work effectively and faithfully together on this public health crisis in the name of the Prince of Peace.

My friends, the story of the third word of Christ on that cross is the story of reconciliation, it is the story of the power of love over the armies of hate. It is the story of grace, and, as the wonderful Christian writer Anne Lamott says, grace “*meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.*” So, my friends, hear this: the “so what” of that grace this day that will not leave us where it finds us is that God has made us one, like it or not, ready or not, whether we think we are able or not to sit down together and use the minds God gave us and the moral instincts God implanted in us to make this world a place that is safer for our children, more secure for our elderly, more just for those beaten down by rapacious rulers and oppressive economics, more nourishing for those one billion people in our world who lack ready access to clean water and whose bellies gnaw with hunger, more hospitable to the stranger, the immigrant, the “other” – all those whom Jesus called the “least of these” and whom He said were the very embodiment of Him. Jesus’s word from the cross to His mother, to his friend, and now to us is the challenge to us, nay, it is the **command** to us to get moving, to indeed truly become that family where everyone is cherished, respected, safe. And our job? To make it so, to make it so.