

BEHOLD YOUR FAMILY

CrossWords Series (Part 3)

Text: John 19:25-27

I

I want to reflect with you this morning on this moment through which we are all living. This is a tough and turbulent time and we need to hear what God has to say to us in it. As I was getting ready for today there was this part of me that wanted to try to wrap up in pretty little theological bows all of what we are dealing with right now. But there is a lot about life that is just plain messy and mysterious, and in those times what matters most is a reminder of Who is holding onto you. I'll say a lot more about this next week, but you can trust that God is holding onto you. I thought seriously, too, about delivering a seven-point prescription for all the things Christians should do to manage constructively in these times. But I suspect we'd all struggle to remember that list for very long or could find a better one on the internet this afternoon. In coming days, we'll offer some great reading material on our website.

I decided that, today, I would try to go both deeper and simpler with you. I want to reflect together this morning on just ONE theme that these times kick up – and then deal with another one next week and the week after and until you can't stand me any longer! The good news is that it is not ME this story is all about, though I like you will find my life in it.

When we left Jesus last, he was hanging on the cross. He had begged his Father in heaven to forgive the ignorance of his crucifiers. He had assured a repentant sinner of his place in Paradise. And then Jesus made one further statement from that cross – speaking words as he died that show us how to really live. Listen with me to God's Word... **25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.**

When Chicago Police Officer Patricia Warner entered the home at 219 North Keystone Avenue she could hardly believe her eyes. She and her partner had been called to the address to investigate reports that drugs were being sold there, but what they found instead was something far more overwhelming. The apartment reeked of urine and rotting food. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink and stacked on the floor. As cockroaches scurried for cover, the officers began a walk through the apartment, skirting the dog feces, garbage and soiled clothing that seemed to be everywhere.

Even more shocking than the filth, however, were the *children* who were there -- 19 of them -- all but one of whom was 9 years and younger. A 2 and a 3 year-old were huddling next to a radiator giving off almost no heat against the winter chill. They were eating meat off of what looked to one of the officers like a neck bone, and sharing it with a dog. While two men slept in the apartment, one of them in a bedroom by himself, the rest of the children -- including a 4-year-old with cerebral palsy -- crowded onto badly soiled mattresses or sprawled on the grimy floor. Signs of physical abuse -- of beatings and cigarette burns -- were evident on several of the kids.

When the police tried to prepare the children to take them to a shelter, they could find only one toy among all 19 of them, and barely enough clothes to go around. As Officer Warner stooped to assist the children, one of them looked up at her through hungry eyes and said: *"Will you be my mommy? I want to go home with you."*¹

II

It is hard to believe, isn't it? Not the child's request, but the conditions that would prompt it. And yet the reality is that in a world separated from God and stained by sin, scenarios like this one repeat themselves more often than we like to think about. Even when the circumstances are nowhere near as extreme as that apartment, the truth is that there are thousands of people walking around who long for an experience of care and connection that their family of origin does not or will not or cannot provide.

Sometimes families can't give people the nurture they want because they are just too messed up. Sometimes they can't do so because they are just too broken up. Increasingly, it has been because our lives are just too filled up. As our world becomes more glutted with information and objects and services, family members no longer spend the time engaging in conversation or working and playing with one another that people of an earlier era did. We often don't meet our neighbors because we are affluent enough that we don't need our neighbors. As the society and economy has become more mobile, kinfolk less frequently remain in the same geographical area as they used to. As we grow older, sometimes even nearby relatives forget us.

I read of a businesswoman named, Satsuki Ohiwa, who noticed that that many older Japanese were increasingly isolated from their children by the frantic pace of contemporary life. Ohiwa set up a company through which a lonely person could actually "rent a family." For only \$1130 plus transportation, a surrogate son, daughter, grandchild -- whatever relative you want -- will show up at your door and gush as if they haven't seen you in years. They'll share lunch with you, spend a few hours talking, handle an odd job or two if you like and then bid you the best of days. When asked why she believed her business had taken off so, Satsuki said: *"What is common about our clients is that they are thirsty for love."*

I think a lot of people are. I think that the way our world has been going for years has left many of us with a creeping loneliness, a vague sense of alienation, a longing for belonging that few of us ever name to ourselves much less talk about openly. And then along comes COVID-19. Now we cannot touch each other. Now we are to keep a social distance from one another. Now we must no longer meet together.

At one level and for a season, of course, these are prudent protocols. But I am hoping that this almost apocalyptic isolation will finally tip something that has needed tipping. I pray that it might somehow awaken us to a reality that our racial hostilities, and our political feuds, and our history-making affluence have somehow kept us from fully seeing: ***We need each other.*** We were made for community not quarantine. We have been created and called to help and heal and make a home for one another, not hunker in our bunker, or only vibe with our tribe.

At least, that seems to be the direction Jesus is pointing when he speaks his third word from the Cross. **"Dear woman,"** says Jesus to the mother that bore him, **"here is your son" (John 19:26)**. And then gazing at the beloved disciple, John, Jesus says, **"Son, here is [some translations read, "behold"] your mother" (Jhn 19:27)**. I suppose these words could simply be a kind prescription for the future of these particular two people alone. But I think they point to a way of living that offers hope to every person already living in too much isolation. I think that Jesus here and elsewhere calls us to be people who help forge a new and greater kind of FAMILY.

III

There are a few remarkable qualities to this sort of family and the FIRST has to do with how one becomes a part of it. Entrance into God's family is not on the basis of physical birth but on the basis of spiritual adoption. Mary and John (or you and I) don't become family to each other because we share a physical bloodline, but because we have been washed by the blood of Christ. Jesus' first words from the Cross suggest how this works. They tell us that God is open to forgiving people not because they are so healthy or good, but precisely because – like those people around the foot of the Cross, or those asymptomatic people passing on the coronavirus, or you and me when we sin -- we don't understand that we are sick. We know not what we do.

As we studied last week, Christ's statement to the thief on the cross tells us that God will take the hand of *anyone* – no matter how miserable a sinner they've been – so long as that person is willing to say *"I give up. I know that my only hope for salvation lies in Your goodness God."* The Apostle John eventually summed up the truth this way: **To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:12-13)**. Have you been born of God? Have you recognized that you need healing and that only the blood of Christ provides the cure?

If you or I have been born of God in this way, then we will begin to exhibit a SECOND characteristic of this new family: We will increasingly take after our Father. As we draw close to God, he rubs off on us. We tend to display more forbearance toward those who act in ignorance of what they're doing. We become more willing to give a second chance to even miserable sinners, especially where they demonstrate a humble penitence. Are you taking after your heavenly Father in these ways? When imperfect people see how we treat them or others, do they notice the family resemblance? Are you known for your grace?

Some of you are probably thinking, "Well, I'm working on it. I'm praying for the ability to FEEL LIKE extending more patience and kindness toward that person." I get that. But let me hasten to point out the FINAL characteristic of this new kind of family Jesus called into being at the cross: Natural affections are less important than obedience to Christ's command. At no point does Jesus say to Mary and John: "*Would the two of you LIKE to buddy up?*" The scriptures give us no indication that there was any natural simpatico between Jesus' mother and his best friend. We have no clue that they were of the same generation, or that they liked the same kind of food, or enjoyed the same sort of activities, or shared the same politics. There is nothing to suggest that there was any natural affection that would have made them choose to invest in one another – except for the fact that Jesus asked them to do so.

That's true in the church as a whole. Each of us has certain people with whom we naturally connect. But what makes the Christian community different from other confederations of people is that here, we make a commitment to being companions with and caregivers for each other – whether natural affections run strong or not. Why? Because Jesus has asked us to do it.

Are you and I aware of what Christ asks us to do vis-à-vis the other people in this church? I did a little Bible study on the topic. I went through the New Testament and made a list of all the instructions that Jesus or one of his Apostles gave to the Christian family that ended with the phrase "One Another" or "Each Other." We're told to **"pray for one another... care for one another... bear one another's burdens... encourage and build up one another... submit to one another... admonish one another... spur one another toward love and good deeds... and love one another."**² Take a moment and study that list. Which of those commitments is Jesus calling you to exercise more obediently toward members of the church family – including the ones in your home?

IV

Someone around you is looking for a caring family, maybe not quite as desperately as those children in the squalid apartment I described, but desperately still. Around you in the church or in your community is someone who would consider themselves deeply

blessed to have a spiritual mother or an encouraging Christian father in his or her life. Near you is someone whose family of origin is very far away, and would cherish having you as their Christian brother or sister. There are spiritual grandparents waiting to be discovered, surrogate grandchildren nearer than you've realized. I know we're being quarantined right now from participation in large groups. But how can you pull together a small group or call up and connect with even one other person who may be uncomfortably alone. As God has said, *"I adopt you... who could you speak to and say, Behold, I am your family member and you are mine."*

Long ago, when my own family of origin had broken up, some followers of Jesus said that to me and it turned my heart toward Christ. Later on, when I was living in Northern Ireland, thousands of miles from where I'd grown up, another group of Christians wrapped their arms around me and treated me like their sibling or child, and I fell in love with the Church. You can help somebody else have that experience. Don't do this because I said so – but because, as he was dying, Jesus told us that this is the way we should live.

If ever there was a time when people who heed that call were needed, it is now. Even before the COVID-19 hit, too many people were lonely, fearful, and divided from others. The answer to this quarantine culture are people who practice genuine community – people who have the eyes of Jesus for each other. In his letters to the Christian family at Ephesus and Galatia, the Apostle Paul penned these words with which I'll close:
Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who destined us for adoption as his children (Eph 1:3-7). So then, we are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are fellow members of the household of God (Eph 2:19). Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal 6:10).

Let us pray...

*Gracious Lord, as we come together just a bit closer to your Cross, we recall your testimony that your **"mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."**³ So then, move by your Holy Spirit, Lord, into our hearts. And move us – beyond our politics, beyond our fear of illness, beyond our distractions and delusions – to see the family around us and to truly, wisely, and practically reach out to love one another – especially in these times. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

¹ *Chicago Tribune*, February 3, 1994.

² James 5:16; 1 Corinthians 12:24b-25; Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Ephesians 5:21; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24; John 13:34

³ Luke 8:21