

Loving Mom

John 19:25-27

Three mothers were bragging about their adult sons. The first mother told of the extravagant birthday parties her son gave her. “Why, he even hired an ‘oldies band’ for my last birthday.” The second boasted about how her son gave her lavish vacations. “Just last month he sent me to Hawaii for two weeks.” The third mother, not to be outdone, piped up, “That’s nothing. My son has been paying a psychiatrist \$150 a week for the last three years just so he can talk about me.”

I want to wish a Happy Mothers' Day to all of our moms here today. We thank you for your love, your nurture and your commitment to your families, and we especially want to encourage you in this day and age where "the hand that rocks the cradle" is as crucial as at any point in history.

As the story of Jesus’ crucifixion unfolds in the Gospel of John, certain women who had been standing at a distance ventured near the cross. At least one man, John, was with them.

²⁵Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” ²⁷and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. – John 19:25-27

When Jesus made arrangements for the care of His mother, He did something that any responsible human son might do. But, we must also note that the church age was on the horizon, and with it, a whole new way for believers to relate to the Father, to Christ and to one another. Our relationship with heaven and an eternal family is forged on earth through Christ’s intentions for His church.

Soon, Jesus’ ties with His family and with His disciples would never be the same. He would minister to them, not as a son, companion or rabbi, but as the King of Heaven. But, neither would the relationships of Jesus’ family and His disciples with one another ever be the same. He gave them to one another. The church became a very big deal, which makes this a very important topic in an age and culture where personal individualism and autonomy seem to be the biggest of all deals, even at the risk of rendering the church a very small deal in the minds and practices of many believers.

There was a day when Christians thought of the church as a kind of spiritual mother. That rings odd in most ears today, but not because we are more biblically sound than our predecessors. On the contrary, we can be pretty shallow compared to the saints of the past. I suspect that we recoil at the thought of “mother church” because we prefer our independence to the notion of any nurturing, overseeing or authoritative presence. We’ll confess a need for the heavenly Father’s nurturing, oversight and authority since that is intangible anyway, but Jesus knew we needed more. Our rebellious spiritual adolescence is what gives us the creeps when thinking of the church as a mother. Open your ears and your minds as we explore what I believe was part Christ’s vision for His church.

I. The Church as the Household of Heaven on Earth

A. A Unique Way to Talk to One’s Mom

Jesus addressed Mary as, *gunai*, “Woman”. One commentator may suggest that this was a more respectful albeit less familiar address for Mary than “mother,” but the next may claim that it is less respectful. At first glance, it seems distant, and indeed, some say that Jesus did distance Himself from Mary for her safety. Of course, Catholic scholars claim that “Woman” is a term of universal motherhood. Even the translators of the *New International Version* seem ill at ease. They render Jesus’ words, “Dear woman.” However, *gunai* implies nothing more than simply “Woman.”

We cannot sever this event at the end of Jesus' life, from another event at the outset of His ministry. Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding in Cana after His mother requested that He do something about a wine shortage. He said, "Woman, (same word) why do you involve me? My time has not yet come" (John 2:4). Jesus seemed almost reluctant to kick-off His ministry with a miracle. It would be an attention-grabber for sure, but it would not really speak to the issue of why He came.

What truth did Jesus want His disciples to grasp that He would twice refer to His mother as "Woman"? Might it have simply been to remind everyone, Mary included, that He had come to this world on a mission to accomplish the business of a heavenly Father? One day, His work would be complete. He would no longer be Mary's little boy or the carpenter's son. He would be their Lord and Savior as He is ours. "Woman" was neither a title of honor nor disrespect. It was not significant at all in how it described Mary, but in how it clarified Jesus' role as the Savior of all humanity.

B. A Unique Choice for a Caregiver

The Bible identifies four brothers of Jesus by name; James, Josés, Judas, and Simon. He also had multiple sisters who are not named. Why did Jesus, as the oldest son of Mary, not entrust her to the care of one of her own children? It seems fairly clear that He had more than just her physical well-being on His mind. At one time, His brothers did not believe in Him. In fact, they sometimes saw big brother as a bit of an embarrassment. The Gospel of Mark records an occasion when the family "went to take charge of him" after Jesus had been accused of being "out of His mind" (Mark 3:21).

I believe the main reason Jesus united Mary with John, this "disciple whom he loved," was because they could console one another in a fashion that His natural brothers could not grasp. They were kindred hearts. The text literally says, "The disciple took her to his own." Translators supply the word, "home," a reasonable assumption, but the phrase is not limited to that meaning. John certainly took Mary home, but he must also have taken her into his family, his life and his heart. Jesus could not have meant anything less when He charged His beloved friend to care for His mother.

Something eventually made an impression on the brothers of Jesus. I suspect it was His Resurrection. After Jesus had returned to His Father, the brothers are also numbered with the disciples. In fact, many scholars believe that James, the elder of Jerusalem introduced in Acts 15 and the author of the New Testament letter of James was Jesus' brother James. Many also identify Jesus' brother Judas as the author of the letter of Jude. But, for the moment, John needed Mary, and Mary needed John.

C. The Church Is a Unique Household

Many believers today suppose that they can walk with Jesus without being closely connected to His people. The church is the community of Christ. Jesus promised much to His disciples in His absence through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but as we see this work of the Spirit played out in the Bible, it is largely administered in the church, the household of God. Much is said these days about Jesus as a "personal Savior," but that is not biblical language. The New Testament speaks far more often about the risen Jesus in terms of His relationship with His Body, His community on earth, His church.

Jesus joined John and Mary together as family. It was a practical solution to an immediate crisis, but can you not also see that it was a glimpse of things to come? The Church is one Family of God. No one can minister to your grief as effectively as a fellow Christian who has been shepherded through grief. No one can speak peace to your heart quite like a brother or sister who knows God's Word, not just academically, but as a balm of true healing. There is no joy greater than shared Christian joys. Jesus calls us to walk with Him, but He has also placed us in His church to walk with others.

In the Upper Room, Jesus said to His disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another" (John 13:35). Love is the Royal Law of His Kingdom. It is the essential glue that binds God's people together. Clearly, the command to love is a bit difficult to work out when we live at arm's length.

II. The Church as the Instrument of Heaven on Earth

A. John Would Care for Mary in Jesus' Place

As regarded God's plan of redemption, to Jesus, Mary was now, "Woman." Still, in the heart of the man Jesus, she must still have been "Mom," and on a very human level, He cared about what would become of her. John must care for Mary, for Jesus would soon only be present with His loved ones by His Spirit in the church. Jesus was charging John to become His own arms to embrace Mary.

John accepted His Lord's charge. I suspect that he would prove to be a fine provider for Mary, but who was truly the greatest benefactor in this relationship? Imagine Jesus' mom living under your roof. Little was made of His divine origins in the recorded preaching of the first-century church. Jesus dealt with other matters while teaching His disciples. Mary almost had to be the source for the stories surrounding the nativity – the angels, the shepherds, the magi, the star. And, as sparse as are the details surrounding Jesus' earliest years, Mary was certainly the source for that information – a prophetess named Anna, an old man named Simeon, the twelve-year-old Jesus' discourse with the rabbis in Jerusalem. As Luke interviewed Mary concerning these matters that she had pondered in her heart all those years, John must have deemed her presence in his home a precious treasure.

B. When We Serve Jesus, We Serve in the Place of Jesus

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you has a part of it." – 1 Corinthians 12:27

Paul's metaphor is not difficult. Your own body is the instrument of your own will. When a body part does not respond to the will, we speak of "paralysis." When a part is severed from the whole, we call it "dismemberment." When rebel cells wage war against normal cells in the body, we use the term "cancer." But, when all the parts respond in concert to the will of the head, we call it "health."

The Church must respond to the will of the Head, Who is Christ. Any other relationship would be described as medically abnormal in reference to a physical human body. If Jesus is to minister from Heaven as He did in the flesh, His Body, the Church must be responsive to His commands. He is not down here walking about in the flesh ministering as He once did. He works now as His Spirit moves and empowers His Church. How can Jesus heal a hurting world if we deny Him the use of His Body?

Herman Ostry's barn floor was under twenty-nine inches of water because of a rising creek. The Bruno, Nebraska, farmer needed to move his entire 17,000-pound barn to a new foundation more than 143 feet away. His son Mike devised a lattice work of steel tubing, and nailed, bolted, and welded it on the inside and the outside of the barn. Hundreds of handles were attached. After one practice lift, 344 volunteers slowly walked the barn up a slight incline, each supporting less than fifty pounds. In just three minutes, the barn was on its new foundation.

The synergy of cooperation is powerful. Christ placed His people in the church and calls us His Body because none of us is as strong as all of us, none of us is as gifted as all of us and none of us is as whole as all of us.

III. The Church as the Nurture of Heaven on Earth

A. Our Heavenly Father Has Motherly Qualities

Isaiah uttered the following:

¹⁵"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you! - Isaiah 49:15

¹³As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;
and you will be comforted over Jerusalem." - Isaiah 66:13

God clearly has an interest in placing believers in a position where they will be cared for, fed, disciplined and nurtured to maturity. It seems clear that Jesus anticipated that this would be accomplished in some kind of a context of community. In that story we referenced earlier, when Jesus' brothers went to "take charge of him," do you recall how He responded? He said:

³³"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.
³⁴Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." - Mark 3:33, 34

Jesus did not single out one person in that crowd as His mother. Rather, He referred to the collective group as His mother and family. There is an obvious sense in which the church functions as the spiritual nurturer of all who are in Christ. To think of the church as a mother who wields a degree of authority over her children has spawned all sorts of historical abuses like the Spanish Inquisition or the emotional extortion of wealth to fund this or that great project. Obviously, the church does not wield the precise authority of the Father through the Holy Spirit-breathed Scriptures. She must be governed in all things according to the Word of God. She can and has been wrong through the centuries. Still, she is far more likely to be proven right than are her children when they are pursuing their self-seeking, self-serving or self-justifying agendas.

The church will never be flawless, but it is still the safest place for any believer to abide.

"The church is like Noah's ark. The stench inside would be unbearable if it weren't for the storm outside." - Chuck Colson, *Being the Body*

Many today seem to think they can progress just dandy in their walk with God without any ties to the church. Again, this is not because they are steeped in truth. It is more likely because they are steeped in our unique western American mindset of individualism. They are interested in that "personal relationship" with Jesus that everyone talks about even though the greatest movements of the Holy Spirit in history occurred when communities of faith were reawakened to who they were in Christ. It is unimaginable that any believer can make it in this world apart from the nurturing of the church.

B. In Fact, There Was a Time when Believers Cherished the Church as “Mother”

In the third century, a bishop of Carthage in Northern Africa made the following observation:

“You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother.

- Cyprian

Of course, it’s easy to dismiss someone that ancient. Besides, that term “mother church” still has that Roman Catholic flavor to it, but the early Protestants had no reservations of thinking of the church in terms of spiritual motherhood. In fact, John Calvin “encouraged us to ...

‘learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until putting off mortal flesh, we become like angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.’”

- quoted in “Mother Church” by Douglas Jones, *Credenda Agenda*

That’s radical to the thinking of many Christians, because it domesticates our rebelliously independent spirits. There was a time when the church was central to our thinking, but today, we can largely ignore her. We really believe that the government is the catalyst for social betterment. We revolve our lives around our jobs, our recreations, the kids’ activities and our retirement plans. The church only enters into the equation AFTER we have chosen all our other steps. The church is nowhere close to “mother” in the thinking of moderns. She’s just an annex to everything else.

To speak of a need to restore a maternally affectionate view of the church is truly not to advocate a return to the Dark Ages or even to the days of “Wally and the Beav’.” It is to restore to our thinking the place of honor that Jesus Himself gave Her. When the boss speaks, we listen. When the tax man says April 15th, we scramble. We don’t place ourselves above such entities.

The local church, on the other hand, we can push around and treat like a fast-food joint. It’s our very favorite place, until we crave something else. I have been told that futurists envision that soon, American Christians will have three or four churches – one to provide this, one to provide that. I’m sure westerners will consider it all very sophisticated, but I hope I never see it.

VCR cartoon

Church Planter Fred Biffle generates prospects by the principle:

“You fin a need and fill it.”

A crucified man concerned over what would become of His mom was the most natural concern in the world. But, in this instance, consider the possibility that Jesus also intended to teach those gathered at His cross what it meant to be His Church and to belong to His Bride.