

Your Mother . . . Your Son

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

The Third of the Seven Last Words

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Exodus 20:12 (NIV)

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Luke 1:26–31 (NIV)

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

John 19:17–27 (NIV)

¹⁷Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

¹⁹Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. ²¹The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.”

²²Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

²³When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

²⁴“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.”

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said,

“They divided my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.”

So this is what the soldiers did.

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 her, “Woman, here is your son,” ²⁷and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Who is Jesus’ family? Who is your family? When Jesus forms a new family out of Mary and the disciple he loved, Jesus points us yet again to the deeper truth of what it means for us to be in Christ.

Other than her place of honor in the annual Christmas pageant, Mary is largely ignored by Protestants. Part of this is Protestant reaction against the extreme Roman Catholic veneration of Mary. Part of it may be simple neglect. Regardless, the third of Jesus’ “Last Words” is an opportunity to deepen our appreciation for and understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary while avoiding the extremes.

From birth to death and beyond

Of all the people who crossed paths with Jesus during the course of his life on earth, only his mother, Mary, was with Jesus each step of the way. In the Gospels and Acts, Mary appears at key points in Jesus’ life. Of course, as wonderfully told by Luke, Mary’s story begins with God’s choice of her to be Jesus’ mother (Luke 1:27-56; 2:1-40). Despite being unmarried and fourteen or so, when God calls Mary she responds in faith and obedience. Martin Luther saw that Mary is the embodiment of God’s grace; a grace that enables faith. Timothy George wrote, “Mary was a disciple of Christ before she was his mother . . . She is

called blessed not because of her virginity or even her humility, but because she was chosen as the person and place where God's glory would enter most deeply into the human story."¹

In the one Gospel story from Jesus' youth, Mary upbraids him for abandoning the family in Jerusalem when he went to the temple alone (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus was respectful to his mother, but his words must have cut right into her heart.² Jesus' first public miracle results from Mary's insistence that Jesus help out at a wedding feast (John 2:1-5). Later, perhaps fearing that Jesus had lost his mind, Mary seeks to protect him from the crowds (Mark 3:20-35), only to hear Jesus redefine his family as those who do God's will. Only a parent could fully appreciate the hurt Mary must have felt. These three episodes illustrate that being Jesus' mother must have been difficult at times – long before Mary had to confront her son's horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Honoring his mother

This week, we switch from Luke's telling of the crucifixion to John's, for each gospel emphasizes differing aspects of the events. Like Luke, John tells us that Jesus was crucified alongside two other men. John tells us that a sign was hung over Jesus' head reading "King

The Immaculate Conception

Many Protestants confuse the Christian affirmation of the Virgin Birth with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

From the first decades after Jesus, Christians have claimed that Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The importance of this claim had little to do with Mary – it was a way to affirm that Jesus was truly human. When we recite that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" in the Apostles Creed, we are affirming Jesus' genuine humanity.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not about Jesus' conception, but about Mary's! It is the belief that Mary was without original sin from the time of her own conception. It isn't hard to see how some Christians might come to such a belief as they contemplated Mary's role as the "Mother of God." Among Catholics, belief in the Immaculate Conception grew over many centuries and became official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. Pope Pius IX wrote that "the most blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instant of her conception." Nonetheless, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not affirmed by Protestants.

of the Jews" in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Both writers tell us that the soldiers divided up Jesus' clothing amongst themselves.

But John emphasizes that four women were at the foot of the cross: (1) Mary, Jesus' mother, (2) Mary's sister, (3) Mary, the wife of Clopas, and (4) Mary Magdalene. Standing there with them is the "disciple whom he [Jesus] loved," who most take to be the very young disciple John who would later go on to write the gospel that goes by his name.

While hanging on the cross, Jesus commends his mother to John's care. By doing so, Jesus ensures that not only will his mother not be left destitute and alone, but that she will also be explicitly welcomed into the new family that Jesus has created. Likewise, Jesus commends John into Mary's care. Perhaps, we are to understand that, in Christ, they are both part of a new family that transcends even the blood ties of birth.

Mary would stay with the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension and is with them in Jerusalem as they all await the arrival of the promised Helper and Comforter (Acts 1:12-14).

The tradition of the Church is that Mary and John made their way to Ephesus over a period of eight or nine years. There, on a mountainside overlooking the important port city, Mary and John made their home and lived out their days. I've twice been to the small stone house that is remembered as Mary's house. Even with all the tour buses, it was clear that Mary's house had long been a place of serene devotion.

¹from "The Blessed Evangelical Mary," in Christianity Today, December 2003.

²for more on this, see the Dec 28, 2002, Background Study, "Growing Up Fast," at www.scottengle.org

The truest family

Some months or years before he is lifted up on the hill of Golgotha, Jesus is busy teaching when he is told that his mother and his brothers are waiting outside for him. Jesus seizes the moment and makes the seemingly scandalous pronouncement that his mother and his brothers are those who do God's will, not the flesh-and-blood standing outside. It's as if he says that blood may be thicker than water, but obedience is thicker than blood. (see Matthew 12:46-50)

In this moment, Jesus is not tossing out one of the Ten Commandments. He came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. Rather, he is teaching everyone that their new family in him shares a kinship deeper and stronger than any kinship based upon blood relationships. All believers are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, a family created by the Holy Spirit which is eternal and unbreakable. . . . *Woman, here is your son . . . Here is your mother.*

It isn't that Jesus is forcing us to a choice between God and family, but he is cautioning us about the choice we must make if it arises. In his commentary on Matthew, Eugene Boring writes: "Matthew's point is that those who have accepted Jesus' message, and thereby have been called to place the kingdom of God above even family loyalties . . . have found a new family in the community of disciples. Jesus signals his compassionate and direct response to those in need, his mighty act of deliverance to disciples in distress."³

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ we are taken into a new family. It doesn't replace the family into which we were born, but it does transcend that family. Mary has another son. John has another mother. Like them, we not only gain countless new family members, but gain Jesus as our brother (Matt. 12:50). . . . Take that in for a moment. God our Father and God our brother.

God-bearer

In Christian theology, Mary is referred to as the *theotokos*, literally, "God-bearer." In early Christianity, there were some who wanted to refer to Mary only as *christotokos*, literally "Messiah-bearer." The Christian community affirmed the term *theotokos*, not because of what it says about Mary, but because of what it says about Jesus.

It doesn't mean that Mary is the source of God, but that she is the one through whom God was made flesh. Thus, calling Mary *theotokos* was a way to affirm Jesus' divinity, just as the Virgin Birth was a way to affirm Jesus' humanity.

The Serene Contradiction

Kathleen Norris speaks of Mary as a "serene contradiction." Norris writes, "I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are supposed to believe about her. And she doesn't make it easy. . . . The point about Mary is that she is [many] things, and more, always more. She is poor yet gloriously rich. She is blessed among women yet condemned to witness her son's execution. She is human yet God-bearer, and the Word that she willingly bears is destined to pierce her soul. Had we a more elastic imagination, we might be less troubled by Mary's air of serene contradiction."⁴

Perhaps the place for us to begin recovering our appreciation of Mary, who is our sister in Christ, is to see in her a magnificent model of total trustful devotion to God. When an angel comes to her, announcing that God has chosen her, Mary's reply is simple: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Mary responds to God with trusting obedience, knowing

the "real-world" consequences of an unmarried pregnancy. Her devotion to her son would endure all the way to his crucifixion and death. Mary's devotion is free of any concerns about doctrine or contradictions. Instead, we see Mary's steadfast, enduring love of Jesus. Christ may have been abandoned, even by Peter, but Mary stayed true. The faith of all was preserved in this one person, this Blessed Mother. . . . *Woman, here is your son . . . Here is your mother.*

³From Boring's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 298.

⁴from "The Serene Contradiction of the Mother of Jesus." This is Norris' foreword to *The Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* by Gaventa and Rigby.

Hauerwas on the “Re-membered”¹ Family of Christ

Jesus, therefore, commands the disciple, his beloved disciple, not to regard Mary as Jesus’s mother but rather to recognize that Mary is “your mother.” Mary’s peculiar role in our salvation does not mean that she is separate from the church. Rather, Mary’s role in our salvation is singular because, beginning with the beloved disciple, she is made a member of the church. Mary is one of us, which means the distance between her and us is that constituted by both her and our distance between Trinity and us, that is, between creatures and Creator. In Augustine’s words, “Holy is Mary, blessed is Mary, but the Church is more important than the Virgin Mary. Why is this so? Because Mary is part of the Church, a holy and excellent member, above all others but, nevertheless, a member of the whole body. And if she is a member of the whole body, doubtlessly the body is more important than a member of the body.”

So may we never forget that we, the church, comprise Mary’s home. A home, moreover, that promises not safety but rather the ongoing challenge of being a people called from the nations to be God’s people. A people constituted by faith in the One who refused to triumph through the violence the world believes to be the only means possible to achieve some limited good, to insure we will be remembered. The refusal to use violence in the name of the good does not mean this people can forget those singled out in Mary’s song of triumph— that is, the poor and powerless. Rather, it means that such a people, Mary-like, must live by hope— a hope that patiently waits with Mary at the foot of her son’s cross.

If this is not the Second Person of the Trinity, the One alone who has the power to forgive our sins, then this Mary-shaped patience in a world constituted by injustice and violence would be the ultimate folly. That is why it is so important that we not forget that these words from the cross are the words of the Son of God. The work that the Son does on the cross through the Spirit makes us the re-membered, God’s memory, so that the world may know that there is an alternative to a world constituted by the fear of death. We confess that too often we forget we are God’s re-membered, and that is why we pray “Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us.”

Hauerwas, Stanley (2005-01-01). *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (pp. 41-45). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In most UMC churches, there are typically a pretty large number of members who grew up attending a Roman Catholic church. (Why this is so is another interesting discussion topic.) When it comes to Mary, there is a substantial divide between Catholics and Protestants. Assuming there are people in your group from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, you might make a list of the varying impressions and knowledge of Mary. Why do you think Catholics are so devoted to Mary? Why have Protestants often ignored her (except at Christmas time!)? You might discuss some of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, such as the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception (Mary was born without original sin), Mary’s perpetual virginity (the consequence of which is the Catholic belief that Jesus had no half-siblings), and Mary’s Assumption (the belief that Mary has already been bodily resurrected and glorified in heaven). Why do you think that the Roman Catholic Church would come to hold these beliefs – what *is* it about Mary?
2. What do you make of the statement “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?” Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? We don’t call one another “brother” and “sister” at St. Andrew although some Christians do. Why brothers and sisters? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

(some of the stories of Mary)

<p>Monday, Luke 1:26-59 The announcement of Jesus' birth and Mary's visit to Elizabeth</p>	<p>Tuesday, Luke 2:1-39 Jesus' birth and his presentation at the temple</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 2:41-52 Jesus leaves his parents to go the temple</p>	<p>Thursday, John 2:1-12 Jesus obeys Mary and turns water into wine at a wedding</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 3:20-53 Mary and the family try to deal with Jesus' perceived madness!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

