THE THIRD WORD FROM THE CROSS

Pilgrim Church, Duluth February 19, 1978 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"Woman, behold your son..../son/, behold your mother." John 19:26-27

As I walked down a hospital corridor a few days ago the voice of an elderly woman rose from one of the rooms.

"I certainly am fortunate to have such a wonderful son."

The voice of another woman answered.

"I should say."

One can imagine many stories within that speck of conversation. Whatever the true story it contained the special contentment - possibly the rather rare contentment these days - of a woman in a situation of crisis who found security and pride in a son who cares for her.

The third word of the cross reminds us that Jesus too was such a son. Before anyone thought to describe him as the Son of God, he was the son of Mary. His last charge to those around him before his death comes from a simple recognition of this basic, earthly relationship. He does not speak of the kingdom, or spreading the word, or establishing the church. He simply asks one of his disciples to be a son to Mary, and at the same time, perhaps, he asks Mary to be a mother to John.

"Behold, your son...behold, your mother." This brief, dramatic, double-request tells us something about Jesus. It also tells us something about ourselves. This saying is not just a bit of detail documenting a death. It says something with enduring relevance about life. This morning I wish to make four observations concerning the enduring relevance of this last request.

First, in addressing Mary and John in this way, Jesus underlines the importance of family ties. More particularly he affirms the mutual obligations between parent and child. With respect to these obligations Jesus may be described as a conservative among his own people. He sharply criticized those Pharisees who held that if they took a vow dedicating their wealth to the Temple, they were free from financial obligation to support their parents.

> And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and he who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die! But you say, 'If any one tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites. (Matthew 15:3-6).

In writing the introductory statement to a document on compensation guidelines for our Minnesota churches, it seemed appropriate to me to call attention to this concern of Jesus.

> It is important /I wrote? to bear in mind that professional church workers are bound by covenants, not only to the congregations they serve, but to their families, their fellow ministers and to the wider church. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees for neglecting family support on the grounds of their religious work needs to be taken seriously.

Ministers who self-righteously accept inadequate salaries from their churches at the expense of their children, are in my opinion as bad hypocrites as those people in Jesus' day who did the same thing at cost to their parents.

The covenant between parent and child takes precedence over any covenant we may make with any institution, no matter how worthy.

But, immediately it may come to the minds of some of you that Jesus, who was so conservative on this matter, said some extremely radical things about forsaking one's parents for the sake of the kingdom. He said that anyone who would not leave father and mother for his sake was not worthy of him and that loyalty to the kingdom would divide families. There seems to be some evidence too that for a time, Jesus was estranged from his own mother because she did not understand or approve what he was doing.

In the last analysis I don't believe that there was a contradiction here. In the last analysis you can only honor father and mother if the first commandment of allegiance to God remains first. Loyalty to the kingdom and its righteousness might force a break with family. Yet to seek an empty peace with one's family at the sacrifice of one's conscience and one's faith would be forsaking family in the most fundamental way.

Nevertheless, these contrasting sayings of Jesus remind us that figuring out how to put our responsibility to parent or child into practice can be a very difficult task. Conflicting values may enter in. For example, I am sure that some of us here have found ourselves in the position of withholding financial support from our children, knowing that might lead to some hardship yet persuaded also that it was in their best interests that we do this.

Deciding how to live out one's responsibilities to one's parents can be even harder. Last summer at one of the conference family camps I led a discussion on what I called "the parental covenant" - the responsibility of parents for their children. I divided those participating into several groups. As I went around trying to overhear what the groups were saying I made an interesting discovery. With very few exceptions all of these people had children. Yet most of their discussion centered around the question of what to do about their parents.

The parent-child relationship is a challenge both ways. The third word from the cross reminds us that disciples of Jesus Christ are summoned always to accept this challenge.

My second observation is that the third word recognizes that we may become sons or mothers to people who are not our natural parents or children. The Bible informs us that Mary had several other sons who later became active in the church. But those other sons are not present now. Both geographically and spiritually they are remote from this situation.

The disciple standing near usually is identified as John. His mother was that Mrs. Zebedee who wanted Jesus to grant top rank to her boys in the kingdom. Presumably she is still alive back in Galilee and still aggressive in her son's behalf. Yet she too is absent from this scene geographically, and probably spiritually. James, the brother of the Lord, could not be son to Mary in this situation, nor could John's natural mother be mother to him.

Clovis Chapel wrote:

> Jesus...entrusted his mother to this disciple because he was present. This beloved friend was standing by. He was near in person because he was near in love and loyalty. Being thus in the danger zone, in

the zone of shame and suffering, he was also, for that very reason, in the zone of usefulness.

The only thing I would add to that is that I think the usefulness ran both ways, Standing there watching her son die of slow torture, a poor woman far from nome in a society where women had few freedoms, Mary certainly needed a son to look after her. It might be said further that in this moment of loss she also needed a son to mother. But it also seems to me that John needed a mother. By tradition he was the youngest of the twelve, possibly a teenager. Now he stood there witnessing death perhaps for the first time, observing the downfall of the person he most admired, all his bright, youthful vision splintered on the hard rock of this reality. Even if he were not a youth he might have needed Mary. I don't know that any man has lived so long as not to need a mother.

There are many situations in life when the opportunity arises to become, however briefly, mother or father, son or daughter to someone else. Such situations do not necessarily cast discredit on our natural mothers or our natural sons. On the contrary, it may well be that just because there has been a good, strong relationship between a mother and a son that same mother may be mother to another son and that same son a son to another mother. Like John and Mary two people find themselves in "the zone of usefulness."

Looking back on the first church I served I wonder how I could have survived were it not that I had so many mothers and not a few fathers as well. What would I have done if I could not think up some excuse every few days to go and talk to Ruth Reitzel or Belle Wycoff, two very different grandmothers, or if they had not sought me out every so often with fresh bread, fitting wisdom and that succoring care that is older than the hills. By some miracle they are still there in the same houses, though fathers Emil and Neal are long since gone. If I found myself in that region my steps would still turn immediately to their doorways, the boy from the great city whom they feared would pass out at his first funeral.

Sometimes there are people who never become parents in the ordinary sense and yet who may become father or mother in significant ways.

A few years ago our national church magazine ran an article about a Dr. Stimson who for many years was head usher at Riverside Church. Every Sunday he stood at the head of the center aisle, directing the multitudes of tourists, clearing the way for General Eisenhower when he was president of Columbia and reserving John D. Rockefeller, Junior's regular pew. Dr. Stimson was a pediatrician to whom I went as patient for a brief period when I was a child. Later when I was a student at Union Seminary, we took our daughter, Alice to him. The first time we brought Alice Dr. Stimson looked into his file, shook his head and said, "Yes, her father was quite a case."

The first thing you noticed when you went into Dr. Stimson's waiting room was that the walls were covered with photographs of children. The Stimsons had no children of their own. People sighed at the thought that a man who loved children so much should have no children. Yet I recall it being said, "But he has thousands of children."

So he had.

"Mother, behold your son.....son, behold your mother." The third observation I offer regarding this passage is that it symbolizes the mutual caring to which Jesus calls all his disciples. The meaning of this saying

extends beyond the two people, John and Mary. It extends beyond the relationship of mother and son, parent and child. The saying tells us that all those who come to the cross of Christ and who find there not only cruelty and death, but forgiveness and faith, are given the task of caring for one another.

The cross reveals both the heights and the depths of the human potential Every day we read things in the newspapers that remind us that the cruelty and malice expressed in the cross are still very much alive. Yet we may also read things there that tell us that the compassion and sacrifice expressed there are also alive.

A week after the recent blizzard in Boston, the city was still digging out. As things began to get back to normal, the Boston Globe ran a large announcement by the University Hospital thanking those people who kept the hospital functioning when almost everything else had closed down. Said the announcement:

> When the blizzard threatened to make it impossible for our doctors and nurses to get to the hospital, Robert Weaver of Weston came out of the storm to offer his 10-passenger, four-wheel drive Ford as a shuttle vehicle. University Hospital gratefully put him on call from Wednesday through the weekend to bring anesthesiologists from the western suburbs, to take patients home and to carry a day's supply of surgical instruments to another hospital for sterilization when a blackout put our steam sterilization equipment temporarily out of commission. An anesthesiologist who was able to work on Wednesday because of Weaver said that if major surgery on a young man had not been performed that day, the young man would have been paralyzed. And Robert Weaver, who returned to his own work in Boston yesterday, called us again to say he could swing by on his way home to pick up anyone else who needed transportation.
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> Paul and Sara Donahue of Binghamton, New York, traveled to Boston Monday to visit a relative who was a University Hospital patient and arrived at the hospital at midnight after a long and harrowing train ride. Tuesday morning they volunteered their help in the hospital's dietary department where they did anything that was needed from washing dishes to preparing meal-distribution carts. "They were absolutely fantastic," said one of our administrators. They worked for four days and caught a little shut-eye on a couch that was moved into their relative's room.

We know that looters came out in that New England blizzard. But we also know that people like Robert Weaver and Paul and Sara Donahue came out. We know that people stood beneath the cross cursing and laughing at Jesus. We also know that his mother and the disciple whom he loved were standing near and that his word to them was a word to us all.

My fourth observation is that this saying from the cross expresses a letting go, a relinquishment. At first glance it may not look that way. Sometimes people try to take control of the future by making last requests of their survivors. Under the circumstances the survivors feel that they cannot refuse. Thus a promise may be exacted from them or a burden placed on them unfairly.

It is true that Jesus asks something of John and Mary. But his asking arises from a perception of their mutual need and it does not go into details

He simply says in effect "take care of one another." He doesn't tell them how or for how long. There is no effort to control here.

At the same time there is a kind of letting go. Jesus' words make it quite clear that he has accepted the fact that he no longer can be a son to Mary. He cannot be a guide to John either in the same way as in the past.

"Mother, behold your son...son, behold your mother." We might see this saying in the light of the last stage of dying described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the stage she calls "acceptance." The other stages do not come clearly to light in the gospel accounts of Jesus, possibly because the gospel writers try to idealize their picture. Perhaps in the disciples the other stages come more definitely into view. Peter greets the prospect of Jesus' death with denial and anger. On the Emmaus road we meet the depression that always goes with grief. But on the cross we find Jesus in simple acceptance that an end has come. He must relinquish now. "Mother, behold your son." Life will go on without him.

But Christians everywhere will protest, "But it did not! It does not! The true life, the abundant life, only goes on with Jesus Christ." Yes. But that is partly because he found the humility to let it go. He laid his life down not only in accepting execution, but in trusting his friends to carry on. "Greater works than I have done, you will do," he said. We may not believe that, but he did.

In the meantime, he trusts us to do the little things that go into the care of mothers and sons. That trust has not always proved in vain.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.