

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
To be delivered on April 18, 2014	On the occasion of Good Friday Seven Last Words of Christ from the Cross

The Third Word: John 19:25b-27 “Woman here is your son.”

Called to Love

In the midst of this very public execution, filled with great and symbolic acts, and powerful and poetic words, we are invited into a very personal and private moment between Jesus, his mother, and the disciple whom he loved. It is so human a thing to want to put one’s house in order before one dies. It is such a lovely and gracious thing to provide for the care of one’s mother after he is gone. Jesus utters these words in the midst of his agony, showing that even in that moment of many distractions his thoughts are about more than just himself and his own fate. Is he worrying about the well being of the world here? Is he concerned with the future of the Nation of Israel? Or is he just a son who is worried about how his aging mother will face the days, and the years, to come?

Mary has come to represent so much to Christians over the years. She has been called the Mother of God, God bearer, the second Eve, the mother of a new creation, even the Queen of Heaven. To Jesus, she was just... Mom. I’m sure it was bad enough for him to die in this ignominious way, but for his mother to be a witness to his humiliation and death must have been more than he could bear. You can almost hear him pleading in these few words, “Mother, turn your head away. Take her away from here, my beloved disciple. Take her away, to safety, so she doesn’t have to see her son suffer and die.” Even if we accept that Jesus had foreknowledge of his resurrection on the third day, and even if we acknowledge that he willingly accepted his role in this cosmic drama, willingly sacrificing himself, willingly dying for the world, we can certainly understand that the effect of all this on his mother was an unwelcome consequence, no

matter how unavoidable, that must have caused him deep pain. Even as he hung on the cross, he was aware that Mary's heart was breaking, as if a sword had pierced her very soul. "Woman here is your son." "Here is your mother." It was a poor substitute for his own presence and loving care in her life, but he did his best to make sure she would be cared for.

Mary, who obviously was there at the beginning of his life, and was there at the beginning of his ministry at the wedding feast in Cana, is there at the end of his life and the completion of his life's work. Her life, and relationship with Jesus, represents the entire sweep of his earthly existence and ministry, his incarnate life. The beloved disciple, who would later become one of the witnesses of his empty tomb, seems to stand as a proxy for all the disciples who will follow, all those who would proclaim with faith his resurrection.

In his Gospel, John names neither of these individuals. Mary is simply referred to as Jesus' mother. When he addresses her, Jesus (almost coldly) calls her, "Woman." And the "beloved disciple" is called just that—"the disciple whom Jesus loved"—though conjecture runs rampant as to which disciple he is. It has been suggested that he is John, the author of this Gospel, or perhaps Lazarus at whose tomb Jesus wept while the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" It has even been posited that *he* was Mary Magdalene. The fact that they are not named allows us to see these two people as more than just the individuals who play a part in this story. We can see them as representatives, archetypes even, of people we know, of people we are.

In this crucifixion scene, Mary stands in for all women—all mothers who have ever seen their children struck down by the forces of evil, all wives who have wept bitter tears at the loss of their husbands to war or injustice, all daughters who have grown up deprived of a father who was taken away by human weakness or cruel fate. She bears for all of us the pain of loss and

loneliness. She feels the sharp pang of separation that is common to all human relationships broken by sin. In the same way, the beloved disciple represents all disciples. He represents the living out of the new commandment that Jesus gave to him, and the other disciples, at his last supper, to love one another as he had loved them. He stands for a hopeful future, for a faithful response, for love which casts out fear.

This episode of giving and receiving a mother to a son and a son to a mother, marks the transition from life defined by loyalty to family, and clan, and nation to an expanded sense of family, defined as all those who love and follow Jesus, even more radically as the entire world for whom he died. In this simple, human moment Jesus, his mother, and the beloved disciple act out the essence of Christian love. Though no longer to be with them in person, Jesus entrusts his mother to his friend, whom he trusts to love and care for his own flesh and blood. Whenever we show care and concern for one another, whenever we reach out to comfort and support someone be they kin or not, we embody the love that was on display on that cross. We show that evil cannot triumph, as long as we are willing to allow the spirit of Jesus to move through us and our actions.

Jesus did a simple thing in giving his mother to the care of his beloved disciple. In this simple act he calls us to love and care for one another as he has loved and cared for us.

Amen.