

FAMILY AT THE CROSS

SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS



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John 19:25-27
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What do you think of when you think of family?

Family can be a lot of different things. It can be one of the most incredible gifts to us. Thomas Jefferson once said, “The happiest moments of my life have been the few which I have passed at home in the bosom of my family.” Some of us may be able to say something similar. But not all of us and probably not all the time. Sometimes our happiest moments are when we’re finally able to escape our families. George Carlin once said, “The other night I ate at a real nice family restaurant. Every table had an argument going.”

Families can be places of great joy and healing and health and growth. They can also be places of great pain and suffering and abuse and dysfunction. But whether you have a healthy family or not, we all want one: a place to care for people and to be cared for. Some of us have caught glimpses of that in our own experience. Some of us have been sorely disappointed by our experiences. It’s those emotions: the warmth, the disappointment, and the longing that we want to keep in mind as we look at the Scriptures today.

Today we’re continuing in our Lenten series looking at the seven words from the cross. These are the seven statements that Jesus made, collected from all four gospels, while he hung on the cross. Our goal during this season is to dive deep into the mystery of Jesus on the cross. Each statement is only a single sentence, but opens up into a richness that we will only begin to appreciate.

Today we’re looking at the first thing Jesus said from the cross in the Gospel of John. It is a statement made to his mother Mary and to John, his beloved disciple. As we’ve seen with the past two statements, on the face of it, it is pretty simple. He is caring for two people that he loves. But as we explore it, we’ll realize that it goes much deeper as well. Jesus says something that is at the same time a warm caring statement about the value of family and a shocking twist on the nature of family itself.

First, we’re going to look at Jesus and how he responds to other people in the midst of his suffering on the cross. Then we’re going to think about Mary and John as they grieve at the foot of the cross. We’ll see what Jesus does

for these two people in the midst of their grief. Finally, we’ll talk about family and try to wrap our minds around the shocking thing that Jesus says about who our family actually is.

Love When It Hurts

Let’s start by reading the whole passage that John records. Here is John 19:25-27.

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.

Just before this, John has described how the soldiers who were gathered around the cross were dividing up Jesus’ clothes among them. Now we hear about a group of four women who were at the cross and later realize that John the disciple and author of this account is there with them as well. We are meant to notice a contrast. Jesus is dying on the cross. The Roman soldiers are figuring out how they might benefit from Jesus’ plight. But these women stand “near the cross.” They are not taking advantage of this situation like the soldiers. They are there to grieve.

One of the most remarkable things about looking at what Jesus says from the cross is noticing his perspective. He is in tremendous pain right now. Pain that will end up literally killing him. But he is focused on other people in the midst of his pain. This is clear in several of his statements from the cross, but nowhere is it clearer than this statement, where he recognizes two people in grief and does something to provide for them. In the midst of his pain, Jesus is other-focused.

Jake showed me a YouTube video recently called *Man-cold*. It shows a husband who is sick and how desperately he needs to be taken care of. He calls for his wife; she doesn’t hear him; so he calls 911 and the paramedics come and scold his wife for not taking care of him better. They give

her a bell and insist she is to come immediately if she hears it. She tells them that she has a cold too, but they don't care because her husband has a "man-cold." That's kind of how it is in my house. When Rachel gets sick, she keeps doing everything and fends for herself. When I get sick, everyone takes care of me. I have to admit: sometimes I even get a little bell to ring.

Husbands may be a bit worse than wives, but it's true for all of us that when we are suffering, we tend to get self-centered. Pain has an incredible ability to turn us inward. As if most of us aren't already pretty consumed with ourselves; when we are in pain, we are much more so. We can hardly see anything except what is happening to us.

So that's why it is so remarkable that Jesus even notices the pain of others from the cross. We'll go into a bit more detail next week about what type of pain Jesus was feeling, but for now, it's enough to understand that it was immense. Jesus doesn't ring a bell and call for his angels. He notices two other people in their pain. He is other-focused even when he is hurt. When he is in pain, he still loves those around him. This is the first example that Jesus gives us: love when it hurts. Even in the midst of whatever stuff we are going through, we can love others. Love when it hurts.

That doesn't mean we ignore our own pain. When we talk about Jesus' pain, we'll see that he is honest about the pain he is going through and cries out to God in the midst of it. Loving others doesn't mean we completely disregard our own experience. Sometimes in Christian circles it can sound like that. So it's not about ignoring our own pain. It's about noticing the pain of others. One of the truest measures of our ability to love is whether we can love when we're in pain. Can we love even when we're hurting?

This is exactly what we've seen Jesus do throughout his life and ministry. Jesus was constantly other-focused. That is what characterized him. As we consider the mystery of the cross during Lent, we are going deeper into the suffering of Jesus. But when we get there, we end up noticing what Jesus notices; not his pain, but the pain of others. As we get closer to Jesus, we become more aware of other people. Our intimacy with Jesus helps us to see the pain of the world.

I don't really care about chickens. In fact, I think they are kind of odd animals. But in the last year or so, I've spent several hours building two chicken coops; I've sat on the couch watching TV with a chicken next to me; I've worked in the kitchen while a chicken is perched on a stool in my kitchen; I've seen my children tossing around chickens like toys. Why? My wife likes chickens

and because I want to be close to her, I've gotten close to chickens. But here's the surprising confession; I'm finding now that I kind of like chickens. In a weird, farm animal kind of way, they are cute.

So what about you? How does getting to know Jesus help you take notice of other people? Has it helped you to love even when you're hurting? To be honest with your own pain, but care for others at the same time?

The first thing we observe about Jesus is that even in the midst of his pain, he is able to notice the needs of others and reach out to them in love. But as we dive deeper into this statement, we find there is much more.

Serve and Be Served

So Jesus notices the pain of others, but what does he do with it? Let's think about the particular person that Jesus notices. It's his mother. Mary, the mother of God. We don't think about her too often, perhaps because we're afraid of sounding too Catholic. But regardless of what tradition has turned her into, her role and appearances in the gospel is important.

She only occurs once earlier in this gospel, when she asked Jesus to take care of a situation at a family friend's wedding where the wine had run out. Jesus told her that his hour had not yet come, but he took action anyway. So we see Mary at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when his hour hadn't yet come. Now we see Mary at the end and learn that John takes Mary into his home from that very hour. These two scenes bookend the relationship of Jesus and Mary. In the first scene, Mary wanted Jesus to take away the disgrace of a friend. In the last scene, Jesus is taking away the disgrace of all mankind. Here, his hour had truly come.

We learn more about Mary from the other gospel authors. In Luke's gospel, we read about her becoming the mother of Jesus. Mary was an unwed, pregnant, teenage girl. Can you imagine the shame she experienced. Even in our culture, where this is much more common, Mary would have felt shame. Can you imagine what she felt in her culture?

Then she had to be "Mommy" to the Messiah. Walking to school one morning this week, one my kids asked me, "Daddy, did Jesus make mistakes as a kid?" I confessed that I didn't really know. I said that he didn't disobey his parents, but I imagined that even the Son of God colored outside the lines when he was a kid. Mary and Joseph

surely had to teach and train him as he grew and matured as a child, but it must have been different to parent God. How do you parent the Messiah?

Now here she is, watching her 33 year old son be humiliated, tortured, and crucified for a crime that he didn't commit. What must her mother's heart have felt to hear the crowd demanding that her son be crucified? We cannot imagine the pain that Mary feels, but she is courageous. She stands "near the cross." She could have fled, but she watches her son be killed.

She was warned that her burden would be a heavy one. When Mary brought Jesus to be circumcised as an infant to the priest named Simeon, the Gospel of Luke tells us that he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Simeon tells Mary this in Luke 2:34-35, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

So now, as a spear pierces the side of Jesus, a sword pierces the soul of his mother. She is in grief: desperate grief. This is what comes at the end of what must have been a difficult road for Mary. Jesus notices her pain and provides for her. As she loses her son, he gives her a new son. "Woman, here is your son." And to John: "Here is your mother."

The language he uses is powerful. One commentator has called it the language of "testamentary disposition." It's the type of language you'd find in a Last Will and Testament. It's the official legal language of the ancient Jewish family. Jesus pronounces Mary and John as mother and son just as I might pronounce a couple husband and wife at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony. He doesn't ask to Mary to take care of John as a son. He doesn't ask John to take care of his mother. He says to Mary, "this is your son." He says to John, "this is your mother."

Why does Jesus do this? Mary is still young, probably not yet 50. She has no need of a son to take care of her. Plus, it seems from the New Testament that she has other sons. John is a grown man. He has no actual need for a mother. What does each of these two gain? What does Mary gain from having John as a son? What does John gain from having Mary as a mother?

Remember what we noticed Jesus doing at the beginning? In the midst of his pain, he noticed others. He is able to love other people, even when he is hurting. So he sees two people that he cares for deeply who are experiencing their own pain. His mother is grieving.

One of his disciples—apparently the only one to be at the cross—is distraught over his death. So how does he minister to their pain? He gives them someone else in pain.

Jesus does for his mother and for John what he is doing himself. He helps them in their grief by offering each of them the chance to care for someone else. John doesn't need a mother, but Jesus gives Mary a son so that she may have someone to care for. He isn't just replacing himself as Mary's son. He is meeting Mary's grief with the opportunity to love another. He does the same for John.

This teaches us something about how God calls us to live in this world that is so full of pain. When we are hurting, it is so tempting to get lost within ourselves. To explore the twists and turns of our pain and our suffering in minute detail. To wonder how it can hurt so much. To wonder if we brought it upon ourselves. To desperately seek for a way to lessen our suffering.

There are times when we need to take a step back and deal with our pain. There are seasons for counseling, therapy, and healing. But we can't stay there forever. What Jesus shows us is that it isn't just possible to love another in the midst of our pain. It actually helps. Loving another person helps to bring me outside of myself. It helps to focus me away from the pain that I feel and make me more aware of others. So even in the midst of our pain we can love others. And when we do that, we find ourselves in mutual relationship where we serve others and are also served by them. Serve and be served.

Jesus gives Mary and John a reciprocal relationship of loving and caring. That means that Mary takes care of John and John takes care of Mary. Mary gets something by being taken care of, but she also gets something by taking care of someone else. John gets something by having a mother to care of him, but he also gets something by having a mother to take care of.

This is how God works. He sets up people in mutual relationships where they take care of each other. This is how he created the world to work. Mothers take care of children, but mothers get something in return. That's why watching our kids grow up can be difficult—parents lose something when kids become independent.

Independence is a tricky thing. There is always the draw toward doing it on our own. Taking care of ourselves seems so much easier, so much simpler. Involving other people only makes life more complicated. Some of us have been disappointed, misunderstood, or betrayed when we've done that. But this is the relationship that Jesus gives Mary

and John to help them grieve well. Can we allow ourselves to enter into it?

Once we do enter into this kind of relationship, it's easy for it to become distorted. Some people are only interested in being served. The world revolves around them and they have little concern for others. I'm the youngest in my family, so I'm used to other people doing things around me. I like to say that I have the spiritual gift of being served, but that's not healthy. Jesus calls us to look outside ourselves.

However, it's also possible to find people that are deeply uncomfortable with being served. This is fairly common in the church: especially for those who want to serve others. Sometimes people can't receive help from others. All they know how to do is give. They can't receive. This makes it really hard to have a real relationship with these people. Some of us need to learn how to serve and some of us need to learn how to be served.

Love happens when we serve and allow others to serve us. This is what Jesus gives to Mary and John.

Come Home to Church

What we've seen so far is Jesus taking care of two people that he loves. The way he does so is beautiful: by giving them to each other, but there is something else going on here. Something on a much deeper level.

Jesus could have said, "Mary, please take care of John. John, please take care of Mary." He could have said, "You'll find relief for your grief as you care for another, so take care of each other." But he doesn't just do that. He gives Mary to John as his mother. He gives John to Mary as her child. He assigns them the most intimate relationship possible in our world. There is no relationship like that of a mother and a child. Fathers can walk away from their kids and often do. Husbands and wives can split up, can be unfaithful to each other. Brothers and sisters can squabble and turn against each other. But a child comes from the body of her mother. Every relationship is unique, but there is something special about a mother and her child.

So it's significant that Jesus gives John to Mary as her son. He's doing something more than just having them care for each other. He is saying something about family itself. It's popular to hear a lot of people say that the family is the building block of our society. Politicians talk about family values. Movies can warm you with emotional stories of sacrificial mothers and courageous fathers. Counselors

help people to see the great damage that can be done within the family. Even pastors can hold up the family as the most important thing that God has created.

But Jesus has said some controversial things about family. At one point, Jesus was busy explaining some deep theological concept to his followers regarding evil spirits and the current wicked generation. Mary and her other sons stood outside waiting to spend some time with him. But listen to what Jesus says in her presence in Matthew 12:48-50, "He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"

If I said that to my mother, I'd be in big trouble. If one of my kids said that to Rachel, I'd be furious. It sounds like Jesus is a rebellious child with no respect for his mother. It's like he just won American Idol and has moved on from his roots. But that's not at all what is going on. He is saying something profoundly theological about who God's people are. He doesn't say these people are like my mother and my brothers. He says "Here are my mother and my brothers." This is my family now.

It's the same thing that Jesus does here at the cross. Maybe he isn't doing this for John and Mary just because he cares for them, but because he is saying something about his followers in general. Maybe he is, at the same time, caring for two people in their grief and saying something profoundly theological about the people of God.

The church is the new family. Our brothers and sisters are now those who profess faith in Christ. Our parents are the elders in the church. Not the "capital E" elders in the church who are called to lead the church, but the parents and grandparents in the community. Our children are the children of the church. The church is our new family.

On one level, we all know this. We refer to each other as brothers and sisters, but we don't really mean it. We call each other brother and sister, but we don't treat each other like brothers and sisters because we don't really believe it's true. We think the church is supposed to be like family so we use words of "family" to talk about it because we're supposed to be kind of like brothers and sisters.

We think that family is a metaphor to describe the church and that our family is the real thing that helps us to know what church is supposed to be like. But what if we have it backwards? What if the church is the real thing? And I don't just mean your local congregation when I'm

talking about church. What if the church is supposed to teach us how to be a family? That's what Jesus is saying. Jesus is changing who our primary family is. That is what he's been hinting at his whole life. It's what the book of Acts describes as the early church was born.

Maybe the reason we were given earthly fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and children is so that we can know what it's supposed to be like in the family of God. Lots of people come to church to make their families better. There are whole Christian organizations that exist entirely to make our families better. That's not a bad thing. I'm all for strong families, but it's not the point.

We don't worship God so that our families can be better. We are given families so that we can worship God better. When parents love us, we see what God's love is like. When parents fail us, our longing leads us to the love of God. When children obey us, we experience the honor of responsibility and authority. When children disobey, we feel the sting of rejected authority that God feels when we turn our backs on him. When our siblings have our backs and watch out for us, we know what the community of God's people is supposed to look like. When they betray us, we are driven to find true brothers and sisters in the family of God.

This is where everything comes together. We live in the midst of pain. Life hurts. But Jesus' example shows us that we can love others in the midst of our pain. We can love when it hurts. Then we see that Jesus makes this possible by creating a new kind of relationship: one where we take care of others and others take care of us. We can serve and be served. And now we realize that the way Jesus allows us to do this is by forming his followers into a family. It's not just a metaphor. We are actually each other's family. When you come to church, you come home. Our challenge is to view this community in that way. Come home to church. Come home.

Many of you know that we've had two foster children as part of our family for the past 18 months. It has been a long and complex journey for us, but we recently found out that our adoption is almost finalized. In fact, one week from Tuesday, we will stand before a judge and he will declare two kids to be permanently part of our family. On that morning three children will call me daddy and on that afternoon there will be five. What an incredible thing! We're really excited and thankful that this day has finally come.

One of the things that amazes me about how adoption is done in our country is that after the adoption is complete,

the state of California will issue new birth certificates for our children. Those pieces of paper will list Rachel and Paul Taylor as the mother and father. That birth certificate declares that even though we weren't their parents when they were born, we are their parents forever.

In one month, when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, we will baptize several people here at PBC. One of the images that the Scriptures use to describe baptism is strongly reminiscent of adoption. What happens when we are baptized into faith in Christ is that we have a new Father and we also have new brothers and sisters. The church becomes our family. We get new birth certificates.

This is some heavy theological stuff. The church is the real family. Family is just a metaphor for what is supposed to happen in the church. This stuff changes the way we live. I've talked to widows with AIDS in India who want to get baptized but can't because their families will disown them. But what would really happen is that they would get owned by a new family. That new family has to be prepared to take in this widow and her children. They need to be her family now.

This doesn't just apply in India. Sometimes I talk to young adults whose parents are upset that they are spending too much time with "church friends" and not enough time with their "family." Do you see? Do you see how a weak theology of the church and family can lead you to wrong conclusions. There are no "church friends"—that's not how we describe each other. This is our family. We are brothers and sisters and that challenges some deep cultural values.

Now, this can also be misapplied. There have definitely been pastors and missionaries and all kinds of people who have neglected their family by immersing themselves in church activities. That's a misunderstanding of what we're talking about. Just because the church has become your family, doesn't mean you don't still have relational obligations to your biological family. If you're a husband, you have a responsibility to love and cherish your wife and to parent your children. You can't abandon her for the sake of ministry. If you're an adult child, you don't cut off your relationship with biological siblings or stop respecting your parents. Those relationships still demand some obligations.

But we don't belong to them anymore. Our identity has shifted and we are now a part of the family of God. That community defines us in the way that our biological family defined us as a child. It's not about time spent or how many times we visit or how often we call on the phone.

It's about our identity; the real issue is who we are. Who we are, literally, the family of God.

Conclusion

So in one simple statement, Jesus does some amazing stuff. He becomes an example for how we can pay attention to other people even when we're going through pain in our own lives. He is other-centered even while he is on the cross.

The way he does that for Mary and John is by asking them to care for each other. He does for them what he models for them. In the midst of their pain, he asks them to care for another.

At the same time, in this simple statement, he completely redefines the most foundational social unit of society. He changes who we understand our family to be. The people of God are our new family. We are each other's brothers and sisters. Our elders are our parents. Our children are our children. That's incredible. We are a fairly loving and generous church, but we have a long way to go to act like family. It's a high calling.

So when you put all of these things together, these words on the lips of a dying man give us an incredible picture of what this community is supposed to be like. We are all in pain. We live in a broken world. We are hurt by others; we hurt ourselves and we are victims of the pain around us. If we were to allow it, each of us could easily get swallowed up by our pain.

But in the midst of our pain, God puts us into a family and asks us to serve that family. Notice other people even while they are hurting you. Love your brothers and sisters even when they hurt you. Love the world even as you struggle to find your own stability. This family that Jesus creates here is modeled after how he interacts with the world.

We suffer, but in our suffering we love and that is the family of God. Come and be a part of this family. Find your family at the cross.