

SERMON TITLE: The Seven Last Words of Christ: #3—"Here is your son . . . Here is your mother."
SERMON TEXT: John 19:23-27
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 12, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

With three funerals yesterday for Ramona Whipple, Terry Kriekard, and Vern & Colleen Blair's granddaughter Brooke, our congregation has definitely been feeling the pangs of grief. Many of us attended one or more of those services, helped serve a bereavement meal, or sent a sympathy card. Whether we knew those deceased persons or not, many of us are acquainted with a family member or friend. In one way or another, we have definitely felt the sting of loss and sadness for and with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This experience of sharing grief in the congregation makes me think of a Bill Gaither song:

You will notice we say "brother" and "sister" round here.
It's because we're a family, and these folks are so dear.
When one has a heart ache, we all shed a tear.
And rejoice in each victory, in this family so dear.

I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God,
I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by his blood.
Joint heirs with Jesus, as we travel this sod,
I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God. (c. 1970)

Two thousand years ago, Jesus didn't know Bill Gaither's song. But I have a hunch Jesus was thinking something similar when he was dying on the cross. In this Lenten sermon series on "The Seven Last Words of Christ," we've already contemplated "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing," and "Today you'll be with me in paradise." Today, we're going to consider what it means for us that Jesus said to his mother, "Here is your son," and to his beloved disciple and friend, "Here is your mother."

1—WE CAN BE BLESSED WITH AT LEAST TWO KINDS OF FAMILY

Maybe the first meaning of Jesus' statement is that we can be blessed with at least two kinds of family. While Protestants and Catholics sometimes disagree about the details of Jesus' conception and

Mary's role in the Christian faith, there's no doubt in Christian tradition that Mary was Jesus' biological mother. As such, Mary's relationship with her son Jesus represents to us the kind of nuclear and extended family relationships we have with our parents and children, brothers and sisters, spouses, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Whether our family consists of the father, mother, and 2.5 children of statistical fiction or something more or less complicated, we know that the people with whom we share a home, our most intimate thoughts and feelings, our time, and our financial condition are the people whom we generally consider to be our core family.

But we who are Christians can also be blessed with a second family—the family of God that's connected through our faith in Jesus Christ. Some members of any given congregation might be related to each other through genetic lineage or legal arrangements, but what holds all of us together as a church family is our common relationship to Jesus. Through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, we're all children of God. Through Jesus our brother, we're all united in purpose and spirit. We who have shared pew space, prayed and sung hymns together, and listened to the same sermons for years and even decades have a deep and lasting bond. When we work together on common projects in and through our church's ministry, we can't help but feel like we belong to each other. Even those who are new to the congregation can gain a sense of belonging pretty quickly, because there's something powerfully inviting and welcoming about the Christian faith that adopts and connects us as brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents and grandchildren in our spiritual family.

I think Jesus knew that his mother Mary and disciple John would need each other's love and support. In their profound grief and loss, they would need to be the family of God for each other. Fortunately, this kind of nurture and support is a possibility for us today also. We're still blessed to have not only our biological families but also this second family of faith in Jesus Christ.

2—WHEN FAMILY MEMBERS LOVE EACH OTHER

As Jesus' words lift up the comforting truth that we can be blessed with at least two kinds of family, his statement from the cross also reminds us that those blessings only come when family members love each other. When we listen in to Jesus' final words to his mother and his disciple, we interpret this dying message in the context of his life and the love that he shared with people throughout his ministry. In the Gospel of John, chapter 13, Jesus took on the stature of a servant and washed the feet of his disciples before the Last Supper. As they were eating that final meal together, Jesus taught them his commandment that they love one another as he had loved them. Love for one another would be the family trait by which Jesus' disciples would be recognized. That same teaching about love was repeated over and over again in the First Letter of John. And in the Second Letter of John, that commandment about love was directed to the "elect lady and her children"—which could have been a particular woman and her kids or it might have been a reference to a congregation that met in a woman's house. Either way, it's clear that love for one another is the defining characteristic that brings blessing and strength to our biological and Christian families.

Unfortunately, we all know families where love is in short supply. Alcoholism, other addictions, mental illness, or previous trauma sometimes makes it difficult for parents to love each other and nurture their children adequately. Spousal infidelity destroys trust and splits up families. Domestic violence frequently creates patterns of dysfunction that continue on for generations. For reasons that are hard for us to understand, children sometimes reject their parents' affections and guidance.

Similarly, church families sometimes suffer from a lack of love. I know it would never be true here at First United Methodist Church, ☺, but brothers and sisters in Christ have been known in some *other* churches to actually say and do some mean things to each other. It's almost unimaginable for us here in *our* congregation, but, on occasions, supposedly good Christian folks have been observed gossiping about each other and speaking poorly about each other behind their backs. I've even heard it said that some so-

called believers in Christ have gotten into fights over colors of paint or carpeting in their sanctuary or walked out of committee meetings when they were angry about a ministry decision.

In both our core families and our church family, Jesus teaches us that contempt and disregard for the common good are inappropriate. When Jesus brought his mother Mary and his beloved disciple John together at the foot of the cross, he was urging them to love each other and support each other. Jesus wanted young John to accept Mary's frailty and care for her as she aged. Jesus wanted wise mother Mary to comfort and strengthen John by encouraging him to continue forward with Jesus' teaching and ministry.

Mary and John represented two different generations, not only of human life, but also of the life of the church. Mary was well-versed in the Jewish traditions and the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood. John, on the other hand, would be able to help translate the story of Jesus into a language and culture that would reach new generations with the good news about Jesus' saving grace. They needed each other, and they needed to love each other, in order for the blessing of family to be realized for themselves and for the world.

3--OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE JOYS AND BLESSINGS OF FAMILY

Here at First United Methodist Church, we try to create many opportunities for all of us to experience the joys and blessings of family. For example, yesterday, members of our church prepared and served a bereavement dinner for Paul & Terry Kriekard's family, so they could spend quality time together in a nurturing environment. That "family" included biological next-of-kin, and also included a "gang" of Christian friends who had shared their lives together over decades as their little children grew up into adulthood.

Another example of how we try to connect "mothers" and "sons" and "fathers" and "daughters" together is through our Christian education program. We're currently recruiting kids for Vacation Bible School, and we're eager to have their parents and surrogate parents sign up to volunteer. In fact, we'd love to have lots of volunteer aunts, uncles, grandpas, grandmas, and great grandparents. Vacation Bible School

is a wonderful, fun, and spiritually-enriching program and is a great way for the whole family to get involved, participate, and connect.

Ideally, we'll be making these intergenerational and family connections in a lot of ways. When the youth put on their fundraiser lunch and talent show next Sunday, we could attend and support the teenagers. I've also heard that the youth might be getting more involved in our church garden this year, if they get enough enticement from us adults. And, around Earth Day, the Trustees are making some plans to teach our Sunday School children about trees and the environment.

Another idea for connecting as family is the opportunity to sign up for the Subdistrict Conference that our church will be hosting on April first. Whether you'd like to attend worship and the various sessions or you'd prefer to help host the event, this is an opportunity for our First Church family to meet with some of our spiritual cousins from the other United Methodist churches in Utah. When Jesus said, "Here is your son," and "Here is your mother," he was saying, it's time to get connected. It's time to build relationships. It's time to engage in opportunities to experience the joys and blessings of family.

CONCLUSION

As Jesus looked down from the cross at his grieving mother and disciple, Jesus knew that they would each get through this difficult time more successfully together than apart. We human beings are not meant to be alone. We really do need each other.

One of our hymns puts it this way:

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;
 Teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
 Be present, Lord, among us, and bring us to believe.
 We are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live. (#560, by Fred Kaan, 1974)

That, I believe, is what Jesus meant when he said, "Here is your son . . . Here is your mother."