

## **“AT THE CROSS” - part 4**

John 19:16b-30; Ephesians 3:14-19

March 26, 2017

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This morning, we continue our reflections on the crucifixion stories in the gospels.



We began with Luke’s version, unique with respect to the words of Jesus spoken from the cross. There we saw a Jesus who entrusted his spirit to God in the face of his death. We encountered a Jesus whose faith never wavered, who not only found comfort in the certainty of God’s presence and love in the midst of his severest trial, but continued to invite others to share in this peace.

Last week, Janet talked about the version shared by Matthew and Mark, where Jesus has but one thing to say from the cross. He expresses utter abandonment in what are for me the most heart-wrenching words of scripture: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”



When we read these words in the Tenebrae service on Good Friday, alongside the other sayings from the cross, they capture fully the darkness of this event. They tell us that Jesus didn’t just die, he lost his connection to God... and he did so for our sake. Such anguish can only inspire silence. After this, there are no words that can make it right. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, Luke has to take them out of the story so that he can deliver his message of God’s constancy even in the face of the worst kind of death.

In today's third version of the crucifixion, John also deletes these most grievous words. Matthew and Mark look at the cross and they see it as a symbol of the truth that there is no limit to what Jesus will suffer for our sake. His commitment is total and uncompromised. He makes himself an enemy of God in order to be a friend to us.

Luke looks at the cross and sees something else because he cannot believe that God would ever abandon Jesus.



For him God comes even closer in the time of trial. And he wants his audience to understand that God will never abandon us either, no matter how serious the crisis may be. His is a story of God who comes close and wants to dwell within us, within each one of us.

But John... well John is a strange gospel. Like Luke he can't imagine that God would abandon Jesus. In fact, he goes to a lot of trouble to emphasize that the "Father" and Jesus are so tight that they can only be thought of as one. Mark's version has no place in John's theology. So, instead of abandonment... we get love... Jesus' love for the community that he had gathered around himself.



When Jesus speaks for the first time, we see that John not only changed the words, but he changed the facts. When Jesus looks around he sees his mother and he sees the disciple whom he loved. In version one and two, they aren't even there. We are told quite explicitly in the other gospels that none of his disciples were present at the crucifixion. Some of the women did stand at a distance; but according to John, Jesus' mother, Mary, along with her cousin, also named Mary, and Mary Magdalene are standing near the cross. Apparently so is the disciple whom Jesus loved.

So the scene is set, a very different scene. Unlike the other gospel versions, Jesus is not abandoned by his community, but surrounded at least by one of the twelve and

several women who loved him. And so... even from the cross, he turns his attention to one more teaching moment... before he says one word about his own needs.

He looks first to his mother and says to her, "Woman, here is your son." There is no utterance about abandonment, no anguish expressing the loss of his connection to God; not even a clue as to his personal discomfort or pain. Make no mistake, crucifixion is one of the most painful ways to die, but that's all in the background.



There is also no expression of concern for those who are crucifying him, no request for God to forgive them. We are told about two crucified alongside him, of the soldiers casting lots for his clothes; but no conversation takes place with the thieves, no promise of paradise to the sinful and no plea for forgiveness to the abusive. No attention is given to those outside the community of faith. His thoughts are with those with whom he has developed the deepest of relationships, with those whom he has come to love.

Let me say explicitly what is happening in these different versions of Jesus' crucifixion. We are dealing not with facts, but with stories, stories that change over time and in different contexts. And thank God that stories change. This is what allows them to continue to speak to us as the times change. Mark tells a story of abandonment with the most uncertain of resurrection stories probably because his community is in crisis, in danger; and their future is uncertain. Matthew tells the same story, but adds a powerful resurrection story, where Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and then to the other disciples, probably because the crisis is passing and hope is now possible. For Luke, hope has become so prominent, that he can't even imagine God abandoning Jesus. His story speaks of possibilities of forgiveness and of paradise for strangers. Luke is often understood as the gospel for the Gentiles. More than the other gospels, Jesus blesses the whole world.



And now we see that John changes the story yet again. “Woman, here is your son.” His mother is traditionally understood as being widowed by this point. Her son is about to die. And she is left without an advocate for her needs. She is not only his mother, but also a member of the faith community surrounding Jesus. It’s all about the faith community in John’s gospel. This is the gospel where Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman, an outsider, and invites her to become a believer. This is the gospel where Jesus weeps over the death of Lazarus, and draws him back from the grave and restores him to the community of faith. This is the gospel where Jesus offers the disciples a new commandment, that love one another even as he has loved them. And this is the gospel where Jesus spends three chapters praying for and speaking to the disciples about being in community.



Why does community matter so much? Most scholars think because John is written at a time when Christians, Jesus’ followers are beginning to be excluded from the synagogue. The story changes with the times, because something new is needed. The message that is needed takes shape in the new story. And the message is, simply put, “stay together.” When the world hates you, love one another all the more. When life’s circumstances change and you find yourself in a wholly unfamiliar place in life, hold the ones you love even closer.

So from the cross, Jesus sets out to form the basis of the new community of faith. He creates a new family. “Woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother.” As Jesus dies, he says one more time, “When I am gone, you will still have each other.”

Their presence near the cross tells us that they have already taken his message to heart. As we would expect from any family, they are there in Jesus’ hour of greatest need. His words may be unnecessary to Mary and her new son, but they tell us, as good stories do, of our responsibility for each other.



John reflects a time when it became critical for the faith community to hold together, for each person to be there for every other person. We've not told this version enough in the last century of the church. Instead of pulling together, we've chased people out of the church. First, it was divorced people, then for a while we explicitly excluded women from leadership, then it was gay and lesbian disciples of our Lord. One could argue that the church isn't growing because we've been too busy acting like that small group of Jews in Jesus' day who've been kicking people out of the synagogue rather than finding a way to love them. You can disown your family, but when you're done, you don't have family anymore. "Woman, here is your son.... Here is your mother."



We need all these stories, of course: Matthew's and Mark's "be faithful, even when it feels like all is lost;" Luke's "Bless the world, even when they crucify you for it." But John's "Love one another even when the rest of the world hates you" seems particularly relevant today. We must begin to take on the task of loving each other as good parents love their children; and as good children love their parents. For though we may not in fact be each others' parents or children, we are in truth in the community of faith parents and children to one another. This is according to John, Jesus' first message from the cross. "Woman, here is your son... here is your mother." Next week, Janet will explore the rest of John's message concerning the crucifixion, something about being "thirsty" and "finishing."

Amen.