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Sermon by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender

## The Third Word

<sup>26</sup>When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!”  
<sup>27</sup>Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:26-27, RSV)

The hymn writer Thomas Pollock, who lived in the last half of the nineteenth century, composed a series of brief hymns on the seven words of Jesus spoken from the cross. The whole composition has been titled, “Jesus, In Your Dying Woes,” and the three short stanzas on the third word from the cross give us a way to ponder that word’s significance. These three short stanzas become our own Good Friday prayer. We can think about each of them in turn.

*Jesus, loving to the end  
Her whose heart Your sorrows rend,  
And Your dearest human friend:  
Hear us, holy Jesus.*

I suppose it is not really a surprise that we should find both Jesus’ mother and his closest friend (usually identified as the disciple John) near the cross. After all these people are connected to Jesus by the ties that we generally value most in life—ties of family and friendship. And certainly they belong there; for they were very close to this dying man.

But if such natural human ties are what qualify someone to stand near Jesus’ cross, then it will be a very slim crowd indeed. In fact, it’s not clear on what basis we ourselves would then draw near. And so the first thing we should perhaps remind ourselves is that this Jesus who is, as the hymn says, “loving to the end,” loves far more widely and generously than we often do.

After all, this is his third word from the cross. There has already been a first word—forgiving those who torment and crucify him, accepting their presence at the cross. There has already been a second word—spoken to that crucified thief, who was probably more a revolutionary cutthroat than a mere thief. Jesus, loving to the end, has already admitted this thief into the fellowship of those who are near to him in his suffering.

So then, whatever gets someone into the company of those who come near to Jesus today, it is evidently not any claim we can make for ourselves, not any of

the natural ties of family and friendship that we understandably value so highly. If not that, then what?

How, then, should we draw near? Consider the second stanza.

*May we in Your sorrows share,  
For Your sake all peril dare,  
And enjoy Your tender care:  
Hear us, holy Jesus.*

There is a puzzling detail in the few verses in which John records this third word of Jesus. He describes Mary and the other women, and the disciple whom Jesus especially loves, as “standing by the cross.” But Luke’s Gospel (23:49) says that the women and others who had followed Jesus “stood at a distance and saw these things.”

We don’t know exactly what happened at Calvary, of course, nor how just how the ordeal played out. But some people have conjectured that, although standing at a distance, John and Mary and some of the other women had come closer for a time during that three-hour period of darkness. It’s only a guess, but there’s something about it that rings true. If so, there may be a lesson in it for us.

When is it that we draw nearest to the crucified Jesus and, as the hymn puts it, enjoy his tender care? Perhaps it is when we find ourselves in the dark, uncertain about where we are headed or how to see what lies ahead—even fearful of what may lie before us. When, like Mary at the cross, we lose someone to whom we are very close. When we are estranged from someone who has been a close friend. When the plans we had for the future have gone awry, and nothing seems to be working out the way we had hoped or expected. Perhaps we come closest to Jesus in our own moments of darkness. At any rate, isn’t that what we prayed for in the hymn? “May we in Your sorrows share”--and in that way draw near?

This means that all who in their own darkness draw near to the crucified One are brought together into a new company, a new fellowship—as the hymn puts it in its third stanza.

*May we all Your loved ones be,  
All one holy family,  
Loving since Your love we see:  
Hear us, holy Jesus.*

Very near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as John’s Gospel records it, Jesus had come to a wedding at Cana in Galilee. When the hosts ran out of wine to serve the guests, Jesus’ mother had suggested that he do something about it. His answer to her probably always strikes us as a bit abrupt. “Woman,” Jesus said, “my hour has not yet come.”

We might say that what Jesus did at Cana was make clear that his mother, as his natural mother, had no essential role in the work he was to do. For, as his

natural mother—a woman like Eve, whom Genesis calls the mother of all the living—Mary would not be a central player in what he was up to.

But now, at the cross, she is given a new and different role. Now she is once again “woman”—not as his natural mother, however, but as the new Eve, mother of a new humanity: the church, which is a new fellowship. “Here is your son,” Jesus says to her. “Here is your mother,” he says to John. Out of the darkness around the cross Jesus forms a new family, a family that drinks not the wine served at Cana, but the new wine that flows from Jesus’ sword-pierced side.

It would be strange—and, in fact, inappropriate—if, when we sat around the family dinner table at home, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters simply called each other “brother” and “sister.” That wouldn’t quite fit. But when we come to the table where the new wine is served, that is exactly what we are. We come not as those connected by the natural ties of marriage, family, and friendship, but as what we might call single people—brothers and sisters in the new family God creates in the darkness around the cross.

Here today at Calvary God begins anew; he starts over. He forms a new family, a new company—brothers and sisters who draw near in the darkness to Jesus. And so we pray today:

*May we all Your loved ones be,  
All one holy family,  
Loving, since Your love we see;  
Hear us holy Jesus.*