

“Conversations on the Cross 3”

Reading: Romans 9:22-29; John 19:16-27

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

How is it with your soul today? Some days are better than others for me, I admit. Probably, each one of us is in a different place today. Some souls, I'm sure, are hurting today. Some souls are rejoicing. Some souls, like mine, are probably tired. And yet here we are, worshipping our God together. We're connected to one another in the name of Christ. Your soul may be in a totally different place than the person sitting right next to you, but at the foot of the cross, under the blood of Jesus Christ, we're connected to one another.

As Jesus was hanging from the cross, dying, He had a few things to say. There are seven of these sayings from the cross, as we've pointed out before, and no one gospel includes all seven of them. When we put them all side by side we're going a bit beyond the story of any one of the gospels, because each gospel tells the story of Jesus' life in a certain way and emphasizes some points more than others. But we trust that Jesus said all seven of these words, of course, and since they are in a sense His last words, they're important and they tell us something special.

But I have to confess, I haven't been looking forward to preaching on today's word from the cross. Like we said when we started this Lenten journey, when you're being crucified you don't say anything on accident because speaking is very painful and difficult, so if you're going to speak, you're not going to waste your breath on unnecessary words. So every one of these seven sayings from the cross is significant; they each tell us something unique about what Jesus is trying to accomplish on that cross. But today's word is a tough one. I look at all the other six traditional words from the cross and I can more or less grasp what Jesus is saying and why He's saying it and what it implies for us today, but this one isn't so easy. Why did Jesus say these words as some of His last? Or, maybe more to the point, why did John think these words were important enough to include in the gospel account? I mean, it's understandable that Jesus would want to say something to His mother as He was dying, but the gospel writers recorded the things they did because they thought those things told us something about Jesus that we needed to know. So what does this tell us other than that Jesus wanted His mother to be taken care of? Why was that worth recording for future generations of Christians?

We know that while crucifixion was usually done in a public place so everyone could see the condemned criminals and shame them, most of the people who had been following Jesus had abandoned Him by this point. Peter, of course, sort of the *de facto* leader of the disciples, had dramatically denied even knowing Jesus just a few hours prior, and not that long before that he had dramatically sworn to defend Jesus to the death. Almost all of the others had likewise melted away when their Messiah didn't end like they expected. But there were a few there at the cross, mostly women, maybe because the authorities wouldn't have paid much attention to them as women. Among them was Mary, Jesus' mother. We can only imagine what thoughts were going through her mind then. There was also someone recorded only as "the disciple Jesus loved," or sometimes "the beloved disciple." Though there are of course all kinds of theories as to which disciple this was, the traditional understanding is that this was probably John. And Jesus, looking down, says to His mother, "Woman, behold, here is your son," and to John, "Behold, here is your mother."

That's nice. Jesus wants His mother taken care of after He's dead. He's a good son. But what does this mean for us? What, if anything, does this tell us about what Jesus is doing on the cross? The words are simple enough to understand, but what's the deeper meaning?

This is one of those passages of Scripture that rewards meditation and thought and study. It's one of those passages that has layers of meaning. Sometimes we see that with prophecies, where they have a meaning for their immediate audience, but then there's another layer that makes sense for future generations, and sometimes even another layer beyond that that gives it an even fuller sense. This is a passage with layers, and the deeper we dig, the bigger the impact of this verse becomes.

So on the surface, there is the obvious fact that Jesus is showing concern for His mother. He wants her taken care of after He dies. Maybe you've heard the line, "Even bad men love their mommas." Well, Jesus certainly wasn't a bad man, but it's not always easy for us to think of Him as someone who loved His momma. Maybe we think Jesus was somehow above all of that; He had bigger things on His mind. But no, Mary was His mother, and He certainly loved and honored her. We presume that her husband Joseph was dead, probably since Jesus was fairly young, and so Mary may have been in a position of becoming destitute or at least vulnerable once Jesus was dead. So here He is, trying to provide for her by establishing a new relationship of care between her and John.

So there's that element of Jesus' personal concern for His mother, but what is that to us? We could say that one of the levels might be that it shows us that Jesus cares for those who are vulnerable. He was showing care for the vulnerable, voiceless people all during His ministry, whether they were sick or injured or outcast or immoral, He made it a point to reach out to them. And here He is, one more time, in the last moments of His life, reaching out to take care of a vulnerable widow. That's a theme not only in Jesus' life, but also in all of God's work with His people, that they are expected to show their love for God by taking care of the vulnerable and voiceless in their communities.

But of course this is not just some passing stranger, this is Mary, Jesus' mother. So we might suggest that this is Jesus' act of honoring the woman who gave Him birth. That might make some of us good Protestants a little nervous, because Catholics honor Mary, and we're always kind of skittish about looking too much like Catholics. And while it's true that some people have misunderstood what it means to honor Mary, it's also true that she was Jesus' mother, and Jesus loves His momma. That's not only because she gave birth to Him and raised Him, but also because Mary was an example of a life willingly submitted to God. When God announced that she would give birth to the savior, Mary's response was one of deep humility and trust, and so she's an example to us today. Jesus honored her in His last moments, and so should we.

There are these connections that get made at the foot of the cross. "Behold your son; behold your mother." All of us there at the foot of the cross are connected with Jesus' concern for the vulnerable. All of us are connected with Mary, and the example of faith that she gives us. But again, there are deeper and deeper layers to this statement.

If we go another layer down, we ought to be struck by the fact that in this statement, Jesus is preparing for the future. Why is that significant? Because we know how the story ends. In the Lenten

season, we're focused on the cross, but we're still anticipating the empty tomb. We know that Jesus is raised from the dead, even though we don't celebrate Easter for a few more weeks. So Jesus is hanging on the cross, apparently preparing His disciples for a future without Him. He's handing off His mission to people like John, His disciples, those who have committed their lives to Him. This is not the moment when He established the church, but it's certainly a moment foreshadowing the church. Jesus was preparing His followers to pick up where He left off. The church has always been a part of God's plan. He has always been working to craft a people who are set apart for His mission as His family of redeemed, reconciled people.

So what we see is that those who are gathered at the foot of the cross are connected to one another and given Jesus' mission. Our tradition in the church has always emphasized the fact that Jesus' blood was shed for you, and that's absolutely true. But more than that, Jesus' blood was shed for *us*. Yes, you were bought at a price, but more than that, *we* as the entire church were bought at a price. The church is founded on the blood of our savior. Jesus died so that you could be brought into the kingdom of heaven, but He also died so that you could be connected in His name to the people around you. Like any family, we have our issues and our fights and our gripes, but the blood of God was poured out so that we could be together. The bonds that we have with one another are a sacred thing. Sacred means *set apart*; the bonds between us set us apart for witness to the world of a different kind of family, they set us apart for reconciliation, they set us apart for the purposes of holding one another accountable, and they set us apart for guidance and encouragement. Do not take lightly the bonds that are made in this church; they are made by the blood of Christ.

We've moved through several layers of meaning in this saying, but I think there's one more layer yet to go. It's a difficult thing to see, but it's powerful stuff. One of the clues doesn't come through in all of our English translations, but sometimes we translate this statement as saying "*behold* your son," or "*behold* your mother." The connotation that word *behold* often carries in a context like this is that your eye is being directed to something that requires discernment; a first glance won't catch it. That idea is that this *behold* is revealing something special to us. And what some people have suggested is that Mary is here standing in her role as the mother of God, and John is here standing in the role of all faithful followers of Jesus, and Jesus is announcing John's adoption into the family. Jesus isn't just saying, "Okay, you two take care of one another when I'm gone," He's saying, "John (and by extension all who stand under the blood of Jesus), welcome to my family." Maybe we're supposed to remember back to the beginning of John's gospel, where we're told that "to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."

It's here, at the cross, that this is accomplished. He makes that pronouncement while His blood is still dripping. This savage act of our brutality is met and overcome by God's loving embrace, and the one who stands at the foot of the bleeding Christ is adopted into His family.

This word from the cross is a word of connection. Jesus died with the intent of giving us His mission of connecting with the vulnerable. He died with the intent of connecting us to one another, and to God. These are bonds sealed with the blood of Christ. Lent is a season when we take stock of ourselves, when the words of Jesus pierce us, when we confess and repent and make ourselves fit ambassadors of our Lord. Are you treating your relationships as sacred things? Do you view your church family members as being bound to you by the blood of Christ? Do you have damaged connections that need repairing during this Lenten season?



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