Sermon - Good Friday: Seven Last Words
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
April 14, 2017

John 19:26 “Woman, here is your son; here is your mother.”

“Bless my mother’s body” is how poet Marie Howe begins a piece about her connection to her mother. “Bless my mother’s body” she writes, as she sets out describing in parallel the time when she was in her mother’s womb, and the time when she cared for her mother while she was dying, birth and death set in unison, describing how everything she is came from her mother: “Bless my mother’s body. Bless this body she made, my long legs, her long arms and fingers, our voice in my throat speaking to you now.”

This third last word from the Crucified One had me thinking about my own mother, the woman who gave me life and flesh and so much else. To use Marie Howe’s words referring to birthpangs: “my body hurt her”\(^1\); and as I get older I find myself seeing in me the reflections of her, of my father, too, but of her, especially for someone who was such a mamma’s boy.

I think also of the women who have been mothers to me, more than just mentors or teachers, professors or coaches, mothers - a number of these blessed ones come to mind, who have lavished me and do lavish me with their life-giving, sacramental care: I’m overcome to think about these people. Maybe it’s because, even in my adulthood, as put-together and polished and poised as I try to be, I’m barely able to remember to tie my shoes or not walk around with my head in the clouds daydreaming of some way things could be that I need so much care -

Mae, who lived in a sad, run-down nursing home where she organized a holiday carol-sing that I played the piano for in High School; Pastor Kay who suggested I should pray about a vocation to the ordained ministry and fed me from her home-cooked kitchen when I lived in my first apartment on my own; Jan, who died a few weeks ago suddenly, a long-time member of the choir I directed at my home parish who kept me, younger and even more idealistic, on some kind of sensible path in her own gruff way; Mother Julia, who, when I began to despair that no parish would ever call me to be their priest late last spring semester, called me into her office, opened a drawer and pulled out a little silver Holy Water stoop with a relief of Jesus sitting on his mother’s lap and said, “I’ve kept this in here for year and now I want you to have it.”

The list and stories could go on - and I imagine, or at least I hope that you have your own list of mothers that is starting to well up through your heart and head.

Although the evangelist has censored the details for us and written the image of a Jesus hanging from the cross still in possession of his full faculties we know that it wasn’t so: here, as he nears the end of his life, he struggles to pull himself up enough to fill his lungs; the rough-hewn cross scrapes the marled flesh of his back, scourged nearly to death the afternoon before, again and again it sends pangs through

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\(^2\) ibid.
his system, a system already in shock from loss of blood and lack of nourishment. Crucifixion was death by asphyxiation in open air; as the victim lost the strength to push or pull himself up in order to extend his diaphragm enough to breathe; nearly dead, starved for oxygen, agonal, Jesus yanks the entire burden of his incarnation up, and he gasps and hurriedly gargles in one breath: “Woman, here is your son; here is your mother.” A last will and testament before he lets his weight fall against the nails driven through his wrists.

It is no small thing that this is a priority to a man in the throes of an inhuman death; no small thing that the evangelist records it: Jesus’ mother, whom we know as Mary from other strands of the early Christian tradition in other Gospels, is never named in John’s Gospel. From Jesus’ mouth, the two times she shows up, she is only ever “Woman”.

The bequeathed son here is no less mysterious: the disciple whom Jesus loved, or the beloved disciple, as he is often called. Even if we can name Jesus’ mother, we cannot for certain know who the beloved was; although Western Christianity has long associated the beloved with the Apostle John, son of Zebedee. John, thus having been associated with the beloved disciple, has long been portrayed in Western Christian art as a young man, not old enough yet to have grown a beard.

So here we have a young man and motherly woman, who are not kin, brought together by Jesus - and it seems as though, even in the way our translation reads, we assume with a tinge of a sexist hermeneutic that the beneficiary was the woman. “He took her into his own home” it reads as if she were homeless because her son died - when from other strands of the Gospel witness we know that it was women who facilitated Jesus’ ministry; we translate “he took her into his own home” but it is quite literally he took her as his own - which strikes me more as if he was the beneficiary of the relationship, as if he would be cared for - as if he needed a mother, as if the mothering role that Christ played for him would now be filled by Jesus’ own mother.

As Julian of Norwich puts it: Christ came in our poor flesh to share a mother’s care...

“At the root of all of us abides Woman, on whom we once depended absolutely” writes Ann Belford Ulanov, now retired professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary, “We fear our absolute dependence on her and deny it, do not or will not remember it.”

At the root of all of us abides Woman - abides mother - on whom we once depended absolutely...

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6 John 19:27.
9 Canticle R “A Song of True Motherhood” by Julian of Norwich in Enriching Our Worship I.
11 ibid., p. 86.
Woman, here is your son; here is your mother:12 here, from the cross, Jesus underlines the absolute dependence of the beloved disciple, the dependence on a woman; remember that you need to be taken care of... the young man, perhaps just coming into himself, filling out his own expected role to be a man, to man-up, in a society and religion with strict ideals of masculinity, young and energetic, headstrong and cocksure - and his male teacher, dying the naked, shameful death of a capital-criminal right before his eyes, in his last words to him says: you are dependent.

Oh. That strikes at the heart of our own societal expectations, doesn’t it? You are dependent. Absolutely dependent. Like a child on its mother. No, no - I am independent. I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I can make my own way and don’t need anyone else - I’m not one of those charity-case...

“The two greatest sins - pride at the top of the list of sins of the spirit, and envy next - meet their match in the female element of being”13 says Ann Ulanov, where pride is “want[ing] to substitute our plan to save the world for God’s” and where envy is “want[ing] to destroy the abundance of goodness that advances... in a ceaseless, generous outpouring.”14 Both of these have their ground in the forgetfulness that we came into this world entirely dependent and, at our best will always be so. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb,” says Job, “and naked I shall return there.”15 “Gratitude is dependence that is acknowledged”16 - dependence that is acknowledged, gratitude - Ulanov quotes Donald Winnicott, a mid-20th Century pioneer in early childhood psychology - Gratitude is dependence that is acknowledged. “Gratitude,” Ulanov continues “to the one on whom we all depended before we even knew the meaning of dependence...”17

Here is your mother.18

Absolute dependence is at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery that we have set about celebrating these few days: Dependence, first and foremost on God in Christ, on God’s own full self-revelation we call grace that even helped us, as Paul puts it, “while we were still sinners”19 - before we even knew what it meant to be dependent on God, God was at work giving Godself to us, fully, unreservedly, lovingly. And this great Mystery also demonstrates our dependence on one another, not just on the divine and numinous, but on the human and material - the body on the cross, incarnate, heavy, breathing, sighing, dying; our dependence on the mother who bore that body in her womb, and raised that child to be someone who wouldn’t turn away from his calling but would face into it fully, even to the point of brutally dying - this great mystery shows us the interconnectedness of the divine work of creative salvation with our own very limited, but God-kissed reality.

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14 ibid., p. 86.
15 Job 1:21.
17 ibid., p. 86.
19 Romans 5:8.
It is for this reason that we can be filled with gratitude these days, even as we sit here meditating on the severity and darkness of human deficiency and toxicity and brutality and mortality, we can be grateful; we can become like children; we can cling to Jesus’ mother as our own -

“Bless my mother’s body, the first song of her beating heart and her breathing; her voice, which I could dimly hear, grew louder… Bless this body she made, my long legs, her long arms and fingers, our voice in my throat speaking to you now.”20

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