

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, March 6, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**JOHN 19:25-27 AND EXODUS 20:12**

“Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother’s sister (Salome), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that time on, this disciple took her into his own home.”

“Honor your father and your mother.”

**THE THIRD WORD FROM THE CROSS**  
**The Word of Comfort**

Our Lord, on the Cross, was no helpless victim. To arouse compassion for Him, preachers have often portrayed Him in His last agony as an almost effeminate sufferer, submitting Himself passively to the indignities heaped upon Him. But this is a caricature of the Jesus of the Gospels. All through His life, and supremely in His last hours, He bore Himself like a conqueror. His first word from the Cross was a prayer for His murderers. His second word brought salvation and assurance to a dying terrorist. And having opened a heavenly home to this man, He now provides an earthly one for Mary, His mother.

No doubt many friends sought to prevail upon Mary to stay away from Calvary that awful morning. But their appeals were utterly in vain. Her mind was made up, and nothing could alter her resolve. To the last she would be as near to her Son as a mother could be.

The lines of Rudyard Kipling come to mind:

“If I were hanged on the highest hill...  
I know whose love would follow me still,  
Mother o’ mine, O mother o’ mine.  
If I were drowned in the deepest sea...  
I know whose tears would come down to me,  
Mother o’ mine, O mother o’ mine.”

Notice the wording of verse 25, “Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother...” At that awful place of execution, it might have been expected that she would swoon at such a ghastly sight! It would have been instinctive for her to turn and flee from such a horrible scene. But no! There she is; she does not slink away; she does not faint; she does not even sink to the ground in her grief. She stands. What transcendent courage! Was it not reverence for her Son that kept her from breaking down and disturbing His last moments? There was no hysterical or demonstrative sorrow; no wild outcry of uncontrollable anguish. Not a word that fell from her lips has been recorded by any of the four Evangelists. Did she perhaps suffer in unbroken silence?

With Mary at Golgotha were three other women — her sister Salome (the mother of the

“beloved disciple” John), Mary, the wife of Cleophas (according to tradition, Cleophas was the brother of Joseph, Mary’s husband), and Mary Magdalene. With the exception of His disciple and cousin, John, there apparently was not another male disciple near the cross — a fact for every man to ponder. I think the most ignominious words in all of Scripture are these — “They all forsook Him and fled.” (Mark 14:50) Who was it who first made the preposterous statement about women being the weaker sex? On what possible grounds could such an absurd belief be held? The weaker sex? Come on! A man in suffering is sometimes a child, sometimes even a baby. A woman, called upon to suffer, can be almost superhuman in strength and courage.

In the Great Hall of John Wanamaker’s store in Philadelphia there hangs each Holy Week a huge and magnificent painting of our Lord upon the Cross. In the painting the women are there at the foot of the Cross, and the hands of Mary, His mother, are tenderly placed upon His blood-stained feet. All around her is a hooting, jeering mob, their hate-filled faces turned toward her first-born Son Who is being executed as a common criminal. Who can begin to describe the emotions that must have welled up in her breast at that awful hour? Certainly, His agony was her agony. What mother worthy of the name does not suffer with her suffering child? She was undergoing a kind of crucifixion, not of the body, but of the mind and spirit. She had hoped that He was the One to redeem Israel. How could she ever forget the message of the angel who had announced His impending conception? — “You shall call His name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High... and His Kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33) But now her hopes and dreams are crashing in ruins. The life that had begun with such magnificent promise was ebbing away before her very eyes.

When Joseph and Mary brought little Jesus to the Temple when He was eight days old to dedicate Him to the Lord, devout old Simeon had turned to Mary and said, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel. . . But a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35) Here at the Cross, Mary knew that that strange prophecy of Simeon was being fulfilled; and if a cry was on her lips, it may well have been a cry of dereliction — “My God, my God, why have you forsaken Him — and me?”

Writhing in torment on the Cross, Jesus saw His mother. The tears in her eyes, the desolation on her face, could not have escaped His notice. It is said that as death approaches, the whole of the dying person’s past life rises up before him. What precious memories must have flooded the mind of our Lord — memories of Nazareth and the happy home His mother had made for Him; how she had planted kisses on that brow now crowned with thorns; the love she had lavished upon Him; how she had taught Him His first lessons about God and man and life and duty. He could remember kneeling at her knee, a little Boy, repeating the lovely Jewish prayers she had taught Him!

Tradition is insistent that Joseph, being much older than Mary, had died when Jesus was just a boy; and being her eldest son, Jesus for years, had been Mary’s mainstay. He had been her source of counsel and of economic support until He was thirty years of age, at which time He had left home to begin His public ministry. And now, as the moment of His death draws near, Jesus has the added sorrow of leaving His widowed mother behind. What will become of her?

Well do I remember a young mother in my first congregation in Belfast, dying of an

inoperable cancer, and leaving a devoted husband and three lovely children. She bore her painful illness with true Christian courage; but a day or two before she passed away, she said to me, “Mr. Smith, I’m ready to go, and I’m not afraid to die, and I’m not bitter; but what’s going to happen to my little motherless children?”

Jesus must have felt like that about His mother; and that was why, in the very act of redeeming the world, Jesus was mindful of His mother, and made provision for her. Why did He not commend her to her other four sons and daughters? Why commend her to a nephew? The answer is this — until after the Resurrection, Mary’s other children did not believe in her eldest Son. As He died on the Cross, it is quite possible that they felt little sorrow. They may even have felt some relief that they would no longer be embarrassed by His strange doings. In such an atmosphere there could be no basis for fellowship or comfort. How could she return to their home to face their taunts? To whom could this poor widow turn for understanding? Now she had no son. Who on earth could ever take His place?

Our Lord’s “beloved disciple,” His cousin, John, Mary’s nephew, was on her spiritual wavelength. Because he was a believer, he understood her anguish, and therefore, was the one best equipped to care and provide for this dear woman, and Jesus knew it. So as Mary and John stood alongside each other, facing the Cross, to Mary Jesus said, “Woman, here is your son”; and to John He said, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour, the record states, John took Mary into his own home. Tradition tells us that she shared that home for twelve years, until she died; and that John would not leave Jerusalem, even for the purpose of preaching the Gospel, as long as she was alive.

When John accepted this commission from his dying Lord, Salome, his own mother, was there, and doubtless heard John’s commitment. We may be sure that she was neither jealous nor resentful, for she loved her sister, and realized that she would now enter into an even closer relationship with Mary.

Now, many believers have been troubled by the fact that when Jesus spoke to Mary from the Cross, He did not address her as “Mother,” but as “Woman.” The N.I.V. tries to tone it down by saying, “Dear woman,” but the “dear” does not appear in the Greek manuscripts. Did our Lord appear to be lacking in respect toward His mother? It is a valid question, but it is easily answered. In the Greek, the word “gunai” (“woman”) is a term of deep respect. It was often used in Greek plays to address queens or persons of distinction.

However, if “gunai” is a term of endearing respect, it is also a term of separation. No doubt, growing up in the home at Nazareth, Jesus would call her “Mother”; but from the time He left home to embark upon His public ministry, there is no record that He ever again used that term in referring to her. At the marriage at Cana of Galilee (see John 2), He called her “gunai,” and again at the Cross. And here at the Cross He is simply reminding her that her basic relationship to Him is not that of mother to son. She is merely a sinner saved by grace, and He is her dying Savior! Though she had years before gone down into the valley of the shadow of death to give Him physical life, now He is going through that valley to give her eternal life.

There is another important meaning in Jesus’ use of the word “gunai” because in so

addressing Mary, He sought to save her — and us — from Mariolatry, the worship of Mary as “The Queen of Heaven,” and “The Mother of God.” In Michelangelo’s painting, “The Last Judgment,” found on the wall of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, Jesus is located immediately under the Father, and Mary sits by His side. But the historical fact is that after our Lord’s ascension into heaven, Mary is found with some of the disciples in a room in Jerusalem, where they joined constantly in prayer. There is no indication that she is in any different relationship to the risen Lord than any of the other believers (see Acts 1:14). She was no proud Madonna, but like each of us, a member of a fallen race, a sinner both by nature and practice.

On the other hand, we Protestants must take care that in repudiating Mariolatry, we do not go to the other extreme in our disregard for Mary; for in calling her “gunai” our Lord was using it as a title of tender respect; for she was a good woman who, like all other “good” women, needed a Savior.

What, then, is the chief lesson to be learned from this third word from the Cross? How may we apply it to our own lives?

Surely this word of our Lord reminds us that one crucial test of a genuine and noble Christian life is that it does not, in its devotion to what is noble, neglect the responsibility that is near at hand.

How wonderfully Jesus practiced this precept in His own life. Granted He said, “Anyone who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me...” (Matthew 10:37) There are occasions when the claims of Christ must take precedence even over family loyalties. Nevertheless, we must remember that the little boy of twelve, after His bar mitzvah in Jerusalem, went back home to Nazareth with His mother and Joseph, and was obedient to them (Luke 2:51). He obeyed the fifth commandment. He “honored” His parents.

Now, “honoring” your parents means not only “obeying” them when you are young: It also means that you have obligations to them when you are older and are no longer beneath their control. You owe your parents a debt which you can never fully discharge. The very least you can do is to hold your parents in high esteem, and minister to them out of love and gratitude, as that ministry is seen to be needed. Jesus did that.

He worked on for years and years in the workshop in Nazareth, fulfilling the arduous duties of a village carpenter, although His heart was constantly haunted by that dream of bringing His message of God’s saving love to the world. But He stayed there, ankle deep among the shavings, till some of His younger half-brothers could take His place and provide for the widowed mother and the other children.

Supposing the “beloved disciple” John had become engrossed in preaching the Gospel and in exerting every effort to establish the Church in distant places, while at the same time, neglecting his duty in caring and providing for Mary; I do not think that when at the last he would reach the heavenly home, the Master’s “well done” would be particularly hearty, do you?

The application in our case is crystal clear. If our work for humanity is known abroad,

but nothing of it is known at home, there is something very far wrong in our Christian life.

You remember Charles Dickens' great novel, "Bleak House." The point of the book's title should not be lost on us. It was a bleak and dreary house that Dickens describes. Mrs. Jellyby was devoted to an extensive variety of public projects, among them Borrioboola-Gha in Africa, and its natives and the cultivation of the coffee berry, and the settlement on the banks of African rivers of the superabundant British population! But Mrs. Jellyby's house was a disaster area, untidy and dirty, with household items piled up everywhere. Her children were undisciplined and her poor husband would sit in a corner with his head against the wall, an utterly broken, dispirited and hen-pecked individual! Now one could wish that Mrs. Jellyby, so public spirited and well meaning, had pondered what Jesus said to Mary and John. You see, the Cross has not only profound theological implications, but intensely practical ones also. Fidelity to Christ should carry us in thought and service far afield. But it ought never to result in our overlooking the true claims of home and family.

We don't give much credibility to the man who professes to be a true Christian, and yet at home isn't the kind of husband and father that by God's grace he could be; and we are not impressed by the Christian profession of the woman, no matter how busy she may be in the church or in the community, who, nevertheless is not, at home amongst her husband and family, all that God, by His grace, could make her to be. And we question the spiritual condition of a son or a daughter, no matter how loud that person's profession of faith may be, if at home, they are mean and miserable and disobedient, and don't behave themselves as good sons and daughters in the household in which God has placed them. It saddens me to hear, even in Christian families, of unending bickering and fighting and problems which should never arise if people were taking seriously their responsibility as Christians within the family circle.

Jesus had just spoken His word of salvation and comfort and assurance to the dying terrorist — "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." But He said nothing to Mary about life beyond death. He did not remind her of the Father's house of many mansions of which He had spoken to His disciples. He was concerned to provide for His mother, not simply "in the sweet bye and bye," but in the heartbreaking "here and now."

And that is extremely important. Over the course of my ministry I have visited in dozens of nursing homes. I like to talk to the old folk as they sit in their wheel chairs in the corridors, putting in their days often in boredom and frustration. Many of these poor old souls have told me that their families placed them in these institutions and then forgot about them, seldom, or in some cases, never coming to visit them. It is a tragedy.

Those of you who have parents who are still living — I tell you in the name of the dying Savior — if you are not a good, thoughtful, supportive son or daughter, you will call down upon yourself the judgment of Almighty God because Jesus, in this, as in everything else, has set us an example of fulfilling our obligations to those who gave us life.

Charity begins at home — "the place where we grumble the most and are treated the best"; and this service will not have been in vain if someone goes from this place of worship to be a better Christian at home.

**AMEN.**