

**Sermon: Prayers from the Cross**

**Today: Woman, Behold Thy Son—Praying for Those We Love**

**Text: John 19:25-27**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, March 7, 2010 (Third Sunday in Lent)**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Those of us who are parents may find our text this morning this to be one of the more difficult prayers to hear from the cross. It is the prayer of a dying son for the mother he loves.

The most painful moments I can remember in my ministry were those when I was called on to offer pastoral care to parents who had lost a child. It makes no difference whether the child is 6 weeks old or 60 years old. There is something unnatural about when a parent is called upon to bury a child. So this morning I would like us to consider the prayers of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the foot of the cross, and the prayers of Jesus, the son of Mary, while hanging on the cross and use them as models for the way we might pray for those we love.

**The Prayer of Mary**

Scripture does not record what Mary said as she stood at the foot of the cross, so to attempt to posit what she might have prayed is what they taught us in seminary that we should not do. It is called isegesis or reading into the text something that the text does not support instead of exegesis which is drawing from the text what it will support. However, as I read this text, I had to wonder what was going through her mind. This was her first born; her eldest son. Surely a mother must have been filled with emotion, and I wondered what she might have prayed, or if she could even find it in herself to pray. Perhaps she was so caught up in her own grief that praying with words was the furthest thing from her mind. None of us would blame her if she was simply overwhelmed. Her eldest son was dying, and while she had the courage to be with him while he died, she may not have had any words which could capture

her feelings. Only those of you who have watched a child die can really tell us. What did you pray? Or did you have it in you to pray?

We can only imagine what Mary might have prayed. She is not that different from the rest of us. Perhaps she asked God the why question: *Why my son? Why does he have to suffer?* Or she may have prayed the prayer of protest: *It isn't fair! It just isn't fair!*

We don't know what she prayed. We do know she was a mother, and we have to assume that she was a good mother because of the evidence we have in Jesus. We know what kind of man he was, and we know that doesn't happen in a vacuum. It has to do with how he was raised and the parents who raised him.

On Friday mornings I look forward to listening to Story Corps on National Public Radio. This past Friday was the story of Colbert Williams and Ralph Cantania. Mr. Williams was Ralph's fifth grade math teacher, and when Ralph's family couldn't take care of him, Mr. Williams took Ralph into his own home and raised him as a son. When Ralph became a teen aged parent, Mr. Williams took that child into his home and helped Ralph to raise the boy.

On Friday Ralph paid Mr. Williams the compliment every parent hopes to hear. Of his adoptive father, he said, "*What you see in me is a reflection of what you put in me, and today I say 'thank you.'*"

We know that Jesus was a reflection of what God placed in him, but we also know that it was also a reflection of what his parents put in him. Mary poured herself into Jesus. She must have understood that her primary task as a mother is to create an environment where children feel free to be themselves. Healthy parenting is about giving our children both roots and wings. It is preparing our children to feel good enough about themselves that they feel our support and our influence, but they have the courage to stand for what they know is right; even when we are not there to help them make the difficult decisions in life.

C. Day Lewis has tried to capture the feelings that many parents have as they allow their children the freedom they need to mature. He wrote a poem for his son as his son struggled for his independence and Lewis struggled to set him free. The final stanza goes like this;

I have had worse partings, but none that so gnaws at my mind.  
Perhaps it is roughly saying what God alone can perfectly show—  
How selfhood is proved with walking away,  
And love is proved in letting go.

We don't know what Mary prayed, but surely one of her prayers must have been, "*God, give me the strength to let him go; to let him do what he has to do; to allow him to love as he has to love.*"

Herb Tarr wrote a story of an old peasant woman who has raised her sister's child as if he were her own. The time comes for the young man to leave for the university, and Tarr describes the scene like this: "*David looked at his aunt and uncle—she with hands chapped hard from selling fruits and vegetables outdoors in all kinds of weather; the face ruddy and round and invariably smiling; the heavy body more accustomed to a half dozen sweaters at one time than a single coat;.... He with his slight wiry body strong and bent from lifting too many vegetable crates for too many years; the wind burned skin; the swarthy face; the childless couple who had taken him into their home; rearing him from age seven yet refusing to be called papa and mama for fear he would forget his real parents.*

*David grabbed their rough peddler's hands in his smooth ones. 'How can I ever begin to repay you two for what you have done for me?!' Uncle Asher spoke gently: 'David, there is a saying—the love of parents goes to their children, but the love of these children goes to their children.'*

*'That's not so!' David protested. 'I will always be trying to..' Tante Dvorah interrupted. 'David, what your Uncle Asher means is that a parent's love isn't to be paid back. It can only be passed on.'*

We don't know what Mary prayed, but at some point she must have prayed for the strength to let Jesus go. It is what happens in healthy relationships. We have to have ask God for the freedom to let our

children go, or our love becomes possessive. In order for Jesus to do what was necessary for our salvation, Mary had to let him go.

Possessive love is not love at all. It is our desire to control those whom we claim we love. Mary had to let Jesus go in order that he might be free to do the work God intended him to do on our behalf. May it be so for all of us; that we not hold too tightly to those we love, but that we pray for them to have the courage to do that which God is calling them to do in their own lives.

### **The Prayer of Jesus**

Then there is this prayer of Jesus, which is addressed not so much to God, but to his mother and his beloved disciple, John. Just as Mary had to let Jesus go, Jesus also needed to let Mary go. However, before Jesus could walk away, he had to take care of his responsibility as the eldest son. He had to be sure that his mother was cared financially and socially so that she would not become a beggar or a prostitute. Without a son to care for the mother, these were the only ways a single woman would have access to the economy. He surrenders that responsibility to John.

I have told you before that one of the most privileged moments in a pastor's life is to be with a family as someone they love dies. It doesn't happen all that often, so they are holy moments that we remember. I shall never forget being with the family of Andy Argue in the final moments of his life. Andy, and his wife, Emma, were faithful servants in the church I served in Jenkintown. They were salt of the earth kind of people who were always ready to be helpful in whatever they could.

As we stood there in his hospital room, watching the monitors keep track of respirations and heartbeat, we knew death was near, but we were also impressed with the powerful will to live that is part of every human being who is near death. We had been waiting for Andy to take his final breath when all of a sudden he opened his eyes and looked directly at his wife, Emma, and his son, Andy Jr., and he said

these final words: *“Take care of each other, will you? And always remember that I love you.”* And he died.

This is exactly what Jesus did. Just as Mary had to let go of him, he also needed to let go of her. He needed to let her know that she was special; that he cared for her; that he wouldn't leave her alone. So there is John standing near her, and in an instant Jesus knew what he should do. How do you give hope to someone whose heart is breaking? You give them the presence of community to help them bear the pain. You give them the love of another human being to help share the grief.

So the words of Jesus may not sound like a prayer because it is not directed to God, but it is a prayer because he is delivering to John and Mary God's plan for their future. *“Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother. Take care of each other, and always know that I love you.”*

On this third Sunday in Lent, this is also the prayer of Jesus for his church as we gather around this table which is spread in his name. He reminds us to take care of each other and remember that he loves us. He offers us that the bread is not just bread; that when our faith meets the symbol, it is transformed into the body of Christ. He offers us the cup is not just the cup; that when our faith meets the symbol, it is changed in to the cup of salvation. *“This is my Body, broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed to wipe the slate clean between us. Now take care of each other, and always remember that I love you.”*

C. Day Lewis understood this prayer of Jesus from the cross:

Perhaps it is roughly saying what God alone can perfectly show—  
How selfhood is proved with walking away,  
And love is proved in letting go.