

One of the most meaningful moments of my life and ministry happened on March 13, 2016. On this day my son, Dean Nelson Colwell, was baptized. I had arrived at church at the normal time, entrusting my family to get Dean ready and bring him to the church. My family arrived right before the last service started and to my horror Dean was wearing his beautiful baptismal gown with ratty brown socks with colorful stars on them. He had outgrown his father’s baptismal shoes which had fit him only days before. So, I told Nelson to take off his socks and he would just be baptized barefoot.

As we went through the baptismal liturgy my husband and I made a covenant with God and the church to raise our child in the faith until he was able to profess his faith for himself. Myself and the two other pastors I worked with baptized Dean in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And by the grace of God he did not cry. I remember the covenant the congregation made with my son that day, that they too would help raise my son in the faith and be there for him as he grew up. On that day my son became a member of the family of God.

It was all I could do to hold back tears as I walked him through the congregation singing “Jesus Loves Me” where he got to meet all his new brothers and sisters in Christ. Dean had just received a new family and these same people still check in with me to this day and ask me how Dean is doing.

One of the greatest blessings of the church is that through our faith in Jesus Christ we are adopted into the family of God. As we reflect upon the words of Jesus “Behold your son...behold your mother” from John 19, we see that Jesus Christ instructs us to care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today we start the third week in our “Final Words from the Cross” sermon series. The first two scriptures we studied were Jesus speaking to the crowd and Jesus speaking to a stranger. In our Scripture for today Jesus was speaking to two the people who were closest to him: his mother, Mary, and his “beloved disciple,” John.

Adam Hamilton, author of “Final Words from the Cross” describes how hard it must have been for Jesus’ mother to watch him being crucified and how beautiful it was that she showed up to be there for her son, in his most difficult moments.

Mary was part of God’s plan from the beginning, as she bore and nurtured the Christ-child. When the angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her that she would be having the Son of God, she immediately responded “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). From this moment on Mary embodied the servant ministry of Jesus Christ.

Hamilton shares that “Throughout the history of the Christian faith, Mary has been seen as a second Eve. Through the first Eve, paradise was lost, but through the Gift born of Mary, the second Eve, paradise was restored.”ⁱ At some level Mary probably knew that she would have to watch her son die, but no mother ever wants to go through something this traumatic and she had to watch for six hours.

Even in his anguish, Jesus takes a moment to entrust his mother into the care of John. In this moment we see Jesus embody the fifth commandment to “honor his father and mother” (Exodus 20:12).ⁱⁱ God has given each of us a family that are related to us by blood. These are the people who look like us, whose characteristics and personality we may have. These are the people that were entrusted to care for us in our growing up years and now these are the people that we are called to care for.

Jesus wanted to make sure that his mother would be taken care of beyond his death. Hamilton shares that it is believed that his father, Joseph, passed away when Jesus was young because there was no mention of him in the bible beyond Jesus being twelve.ⁱⁱⁱ In that day and age women had no property rights and could not hold jobs so they needed to be taken care by a man. In this tender moment, Jesus entrusted his mother to John.

Although we all hear the call to “honor our father and mother” and see this commandment embodied even by Jesus Christ, I know many of us can find this commandment difficult. Especially when we are caring for parents as they age. It is difficult finding the balance between caring for our loved ones and giving them the freedom they need to continue to thrive in their lives.

I have worked with many people throughout my ministry who struggle to know how to care for their parents. The best thing we can do for our parents are care for them and make a concerted effort to spend time with them face to face. This is how we honor our fathers and mothers, when they know that they are unconditionally loved by us. We may not always agree with the decisions our parents make, but we are called to respect and love them because they are our parents.

Here in this moment of Scripture Jesus shows respect and love to his mother showing her that she will not be alone. In “Final Words from the Cross” we learn that “According to one tradition in the church, Mary lived out her days with John in the town of Ephesus on the west coast of what is now Turkey. You can even visit what some believe was the home John built for Mary and the place she lived until the end of her life.”^{iv}

So who was this “beloved disciple” the one that Jesus entrusted to care for his mother? Scholars believe that his “beloved disciple” was the disciple John, son of Zebedee, brother of the disciple, James.^v

John was in Jesus’ inner circle along with his brother, James, and Peter. These three men got an even more in depth understanding to who Jesus was. For example, John was one of three disciples who was with Jesus during the transfiguration, where Jesus turned bright white and God said, “This is my son...” (Matthew 17). John saw Jesus bring Jairus’ daughter back to life (Mark 5:37). John was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he shared with them his grief about what was about to happen (Matthew 26:37-38).

John, this beloved disciple, was the only disciple who was near Jesus at the crucifixion. The other disciples were hiding in fear. Perhaps this is how Jesus knew that John was the one he should entrust his mother to. In his words, “Behold your son...and son behold your mother” (John 19) we see that Jesus was making these two important people to him into a new family. John would now be responsible for the care of his mother for the rest of his life.

The amazing thing about God is God gives us the gift of the church, a place in which we find a new family a spiritual family, where strangers become our family. I could tell you a million stories across the five churches I have served where church members have treated one another as family.

I wanted to share one that is especially touching with you today. At my first appointment there was a young woman named Rachel. Her father had left home when she was young, and her mother had died tragically in a fire when she was a teenager. She was the youngest of three sisters. Although she never ended up in foster care, her sisters were not able to adequately care for her and she was barely getting by.

The church family at Warwick Memorial UMC loved her so much. They would invite her out to dinner, she would stay with youth group friends over the weekends. Parents would put money towards scholarships so she could go on all the youth mission trips.

When she became a young adult, she wanted to give back to the church that so freely and lovingly cherished her. She helped with the youth group, something that became a passion for her. She always stayed connected to the church. There were three particular gentlemen who were good friends who all helped out with the youth group. They became surrogate fathers for Rachel, and when she got married two years ago all three of them walked her down the aisle.

If you could see the look on all of their faces they all looked like the proudest fathers in the world...and they were because this was their daughter. Though not through blood, they had adopted Rachel and lived faithfully into the covenant they made with her through her baptism and confirmation.

I have so many other stories like this that I could share with you today and one of my greatest joys in ministry is to watch other people live out their discipleship like this. I see this also on our charge through the way that people care for one another and check on each other.

We are a family. Although no family is perfect and we may sometimes disagree, God calls us to love one another, just as Jesus Christ loved us. We are called to share in life together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Adam Hamilton shares that we are called to “see those in need as our mother or father or son or daughter.”^{vi} Today we are called to remember that there are people like Mary who have lost a son or daughter too young. There are people who grieve during holidays instead of celebrate. We are called to remember that there are people like John who have taken on the responsibility to care for someone in need of care.

We have many caregivers in our congregation and although I know that each and every one of them would choose to do it again in a heartbeat, caregiving is hard work. It requires a lot of sacrifice and it comes with a lot of pain.

So how can we be on the lookout for those in need of family both in our congregation and in the community? In our congregation, how are we caring for those who do not have a support system, who do not have family around to help them? Can we be available to offer care and take people to appointments?

In our community how are we responding to crises? What would it look like for our charge to be a first responder?

Throughout our lives we all have the opportunity to fill these roles in the lives of other people, but are we taking the time to answer God’s call to do this?

Recently in my life I have been blessed by a spiritual older sister. I worked with her in my last appointment for a short period and during that time we got to know each other a little bit. She then left the church and we did not talk for a while.

By the grace of God, we got reconnected about a year later. God knew that we would need each other. Ansley saw me through Nelson’s health issues including his most recent scare with cancer.

She saw me through the early stages of motherhood and has always been my constant cheerleader encouraging me to continue to do the things that God is calling me to do and I like to think that I return the favor.

I continue to be part of her support system. Both of her parents and brothers passed away, so she often has the weight of full responsibility on her shoulders as she does not have any immediate family to help her. I remind her that she is not alone, that she is rocking motherhood and ministry as a youth pastor.

What a blessing our church family is in the hardest of times and in the most beautiful moments. I am so thankful that I continue to serve in churches where spiritual families care for one another through their love of Jesus Christ.

The good news for our lives today is that God does not leave us orphaned, God gives us the gift of the church, people to journey alongside as we practice our discipleship. May we continue to notice the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ and respond. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton “Final Words from the Cross.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2011. P. 55.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 53.

^{iv} Ibid, 56.

^v *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 2. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2006. P. 422-423.

^{vi} Hamilton, p. 61.

Additional Resources

The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 832.