



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Would you all please stand for the reading of the scripture momentarily?

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, woman, here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, here is your mother. And from that hour, the disciple took her into his own home.”

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

I want to say first and foremost, thank you to my good friend, the Reverend Charles Christian Adams, for this incredible opportunity for our congregations to come together and to be together on this day. There is something truly powerful about this, something unexpected to the world around us, and something so profoundly important. And I'm so grateful for it.

And I also want to thank my sister in Christ, Manisha Dostert, who thinks too high of me. But we do talk about our sermons a lot. And when Pastor and I talk about our sermons, her sermons are like a recipe that you have to let marinade for weeks. And so I get calls about two weeks before saying, I don't know what to do with this passage, and I'm not sure what's going on. And then earlier this week she says, the Holy Spirit is just deserting me. I'm running around. I said, well, stop running after the Holy Spirit. That's part of the thing. If you run, the spirit runs away. It's just the way it goes. It's just like chasing a cat. I mean that with deep respect, but you understand what I'm saying. The cat will get out of the way quickly.

And for me, the spirit comes and throws me out of bed. And this morning the spirit threw me out of bed. And that's okay because when I do sermons, they're not so much like marinades, they're more like fresh baked bread. It comes right out of the oven, a little warm. I might have rushed it. It might be a little sticky in the center, but who among us wouldn't want that bread that's warm and maybe a little sticky, rather than bread that is dry and been sitting around for a bit?

So this morning at about four o'clock, I ripped up the sermon I had prepared and I began to think and pray more deeply about these words: “Mother, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.” And I began to see a space in those words because I'm seeing an innocent man being murdered in front of his mother. And there is a space between those words. There's always a space between words and scripture. There's always room between what is spoken and what is said, between the word that is declared and the word that is received. We have to mind the gap, as the British like to remind us when we get on the subway.

But there is a deeper gap here, and that is a kind of ellipsis, a kind of space. Because as Jesus says this to Mary and the beloved disciples, we are conscious we are in the moment seeing Jesus as if for the first time, it seems, through Mary's eyes. And we see a mother losing a child in the most inhuman way. And I began to go with that lead by the spirit, and I began to look for prayers that mothers have offered for the children they have lost. And I have three prayers I want to lift up as I get into this text today, and you'll see perhaps the relevance of these prayers in the women who speak them. But I'll stay with the prayers and I'll let you draw the conclusions.

The first prayer is by Emily Stern, who offers this prayer that she calls A Parent's Blessing for the Loss of Their Child. Emily Stern is Jewish and she prays out of her tradition.

“My soul is so bound up with yours, my child.
But where are you who was once with me?
Now I drop my head in sorrow
Downward do I go down to Sheol, down to the darkness in grief.
My soul is bound with yours.
‘Take me instead of them,’ I say.
But, with this, You take me too.
Forever I am bound with you, my child. Forever I’m bound with you.
Who will witness me in this sorrow, this woe that overtakes me?
For the loss of all that could have been. The loss of what was meant to be.
I have protected; I have loved.
I stand before my God forever.
God, who returns the hearts of parents to their children
And children to their parents,
God knows, my soul is bound with yours.
Blessed are You, God, who binds the souls of parents with their children.
Barukh atah Adonai, hakosher nefashot horim im beneihem.”

And then we are instructed to tear a garment.

The second prayer is by Nada Siddiqui, a Muslim mother who lost her child and started a blog called Mercy In Loss. And there's two untranslated pieces in the Arabic that I'll help with. One is she uses a word called sujood, which is the moment where you prayerfully touch your forehead to the ground. And the second is sabr. And in Islam and in Arabic, much like the Inuit, there are many different words for faith, just as there are many different words for snow. And sabr means patience. It's the kind of faith that is patient. And here is her prayer, which goes with the grain of the names of God.

“Call on Allah with His Beautiful Names and He will answer you in ways you can not envision.

He is Al-Waliy (The Friend, Patron & Helper). Cry to him in sujood.

He is As-Samee (The All-Hearing), Al-Baseer (The All-Seeing), Al-Aleem (The All-Knowing), Al-Khabeer (The All-Aware). He knows the pain in your heart. Cry for Him to ease it.

He is As-Salam (Source of Peace and Safety), Beg Him to send peace to your heart.

He is Al-Wudud (The Loving), Ar-Rauf (The Kind), ask Him to take care of your broken heart.

He is Ar-Rahman (The Most Compassionate), Ar-Rahim (The Most Merciful), plead with Him to bestow His Mercy and Love on you and to ease the hardship of this trial for you.

He is Al-Hakim (The Wise). Cry to Him that you trust His Wisdom in this plan for you and to help you understand and accept it.

He is An-Nur (The Light), Al-Fattah (The Opener) ask Him to illuminate this darkness and open a path for you that is best for you.

He is Al-Wahhab (The Bestower), Al-Karim (The Bountiful). Ask Him to bless you with healthy children and/or make your existing children a “qurraṭ a’yun” (coolness of your eyes).

He is Al-Aziz (The Almighty), Al-Jabbar (The Irresistible), Al-Mutakabbir (The Majestic), Malik-ul-Mulk (The Owner of all Sovereignty), beg Him to reunite you and your family with your child in jannat-firdaus (highest paradise).

He is Al-Mujib (The Responsive), Dhul-Jalali-Wal-Ikram (The Lord of Majesty and Generosity). Pray and He will answer your prayers.”

The final prayer takes the form of a kind of letter written by ShaRhonda Knott-Dawson, a blogger in Chicago and a member of Trinity United Church of Christ. She puts herself in the place of Mary writing a letter to any mother who has lost a child.

“Dear Mourning Mothers,

With the spirit of love, peace, and understanding, I write this letter to all of the mothers of the world that are in mourning, specifically, to the mothers who have had their children murdered. You, the mothers whose children died a violent, preventable death, whether they died as a soldier in war or a victims of war, urban violence, or government sanctioned violence via the death penalty, I am with you. I write you, dear mothers, as a mother whose child was killed by terrible violence.

[My son's] murder could not stop his love. Your child’s death cannot stop love either. No one has the power to take away the love. Our pain is etched in the tapestry of the world, our pain, our tears, will be shared with everyone as the rain pours down on the earth. Our murdered children are seeds planted in the ground. The rain, our tears, coupled with the light, from our sun, and the love, from my Son, can nurture those seeds and turn them into trees of love, mercy, and grace.

Your pain won’t go away completely but it can be transformed into part of a movement. A movement to bring more love and eradicate violence on earth. My dear mourning mothers all over the world know that your tears are my tears; your pain is my pain; your child is my child; when you are in pain, I am in pain with you. We did not endure this evil in vain. We will transform our pain into the tools for love, and win.

Yours in mourning, yours in love, yours in the name of my son, the Christ.

Mary, the mother of Jesus.”

I am so grateful for these women and their prayers. I am grateful for these prayers because they help me enter into that gap, that space between the words in our reading today from John. I'm grateful because it allows me to see Jesus anew, and I'm also grateful that I get to see Mary anew. My eyes have been opened by these prayers and I am so blessed by them. And my heart has been broken.

And when you read the great theologies of the cross, very few people have ever taken in the words of today's gospel that I've been asked to preach about, "When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple he loves standing beside her, he said to his mother, woman, here is your son, and to the disciple, here is your mother." Very few people fold that into their theologies of the cross. But I would trade a couple of Jesus's miracles to know that this actually happened. I would give up some of the claims that are made about Jesus to know that He loved His mother in this way, and as He died, He said these words to her and to His beloved disciple.

Just as I would give up Jesus walking on water, so long as I could know that Jesus, the Son of God, wept. Because if you do not have this, you don't have anything because that space is holy. And the fact that God inhabited it fully in Christ makes it possible that it can be transformed. So into that space between words and to any mother who has lost a child, and to any of us who have suffered from violence, and anybody in this world that we know or have touched by who have been profoundly shaken. I am so blessed and honored, and I am struck by this opportunity to be with you.

And of course it is only natural that a child would cry at this moment because somewhere there's a mother who is worrying about her children. With all of that in mind, I just have a few things I want to lift up about today's gospel that I think are really important. The first is what you need to see in this gospel passage is that in the Gospel of John, the beginning and the end run together. There is a connection between the Alpha of the first few chapters of John and the Omega of Christ's crucifixion. And that connection is linguistic, but it also creates that space, that profound space between the words into which the human condition inhabits.

And so when we meet Mary in the Gospel of John, we never actually know her as Mary. John never says that Jesus's mother is Mary. We only meet Mary in the second chapter when Jesus is at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. And there He says the same exact words that He calls his mother when He is dying on the cross. *Gunai* – woman. "Woman, what would you have me to do?" Now there are theologians that will tell you that Jesus was not sassing his mother. I'm not one of those theologians. This is clearly a moment of disrespect, and she took it because she was better than that and she knew it. And she knew that she had a son who would listen to His mother and He did.

But recall the words that He says early on in John's chapter two. He says, woman, my hour has not yet come. And that word, woman and hour, those two words recur at the omega, in the moment in which He is dying. And so Jesus's first sign in Cana of Galilee becomes a signification of what is going to happen at this moment in which He gives His last. There is an Alpha that meets the Omega and they come together in Christ. You see it again in John chapter four, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman and there are theologians who like to

tell us that the fact that the woman has had five husbands means that she is somehow dishonorable, but that is not the case because if she was dishonorable, none of the Samaritans would've listened to her. And yet she is the first evangelist and she creates the first church in Samaria. She's a survivor, not a woman of dishonor. She has lived through five husbands.

And again, Jesus says to her, woman, if you knew who was asking you for a drink of water, you would've given him water and he would've given you living water. And there is again, this moment in which the Alpha meets the Omega because it happens with the woman that he meets her at 12 noon, the hour that He is crucified. And He offers living water to her in the fourth chapter. And in the 19th chapter, He is crucified and gives the living water of His blood. And again, this is just another moment in which it takes images and words from chapter two, moves it through chapter four and brings it to chapter 19 because you have the water that becomes wine at Cana, and that becomes the wine of the blood that we drink to survive. So the Alpha and the Omega go together. You see them constantly going.

And then there is a final moment when Jesus is with a woman caught in adultery. And she's surrounded by people who want to make her pay and they want to get Jesus on side or put Him outside. So they ask Him what to do and He says to them, let those without sin be the first to cast the first stone. And the woman somehow watches as her accusers melt away. And Jesus says, where are your accusers? They have left me. Has no one condemned you? No one, Lord. And he says, neither do I condemn you. Go on your way and do not sin again. Jesus gives her a second chance, a new beginning. And again, this woman, this word "woman" is a kind of foreshadowing of the Omega that we get today.

You and I have the opportunity to see in that word "woman" an invitation to see things from a different perspective today, or maybe to recognize that the perspective that we have been born with is a mode of revelation. You and I have been given an opportunity to see Jesus creating a kind of community and new family. What anthropologists would come to say is a fictive community, and this is the community we build beyond our relations of blood. It's a community based upon grace and mercy and friendship. And those of us who have had difficult relationships with our mothers know how important those new communities can be, that new family can be, that church family can be. And today we have that space. It may not do a great deal of work in the theologies of the church, but I would never give it up. Because it's in that space that we find ourselves today in this church.

Having begun with poetry and prayer, I will close with poetry and prayer so that the Alpha and the Omega come together and Christ is seen as King and Lord of all. And this is from Jan Richardson called A Blessing for the Broken Hearted.

“Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain

than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.”

Amen.