

Family
John 19:25-27
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Please pray with me:

*Holy God,
This morning, through this word,
gather us together as more than mere friends
and as more than casual acquaintances.
Gather us as your holy family,
through which no orphans are left behind.
Through Christ our Lord, amen.*

The Texas-born country singer, Kacey Musgraves, has a song about families. It starts like this:

*They're there for your first year, they give you your first beer
When you get your heart broke, they're there for your worst year
Don't get you at all, but your apple don't fall too far from 'em*

*They own too much wicker and drink too much liquor
You'd wash your hands of them, but blood's always thicker
You might look just like 'em, that don't mean you're like 'em
But you love 'em*

*Family is family, in church or in prison
You get what you get, and you don't get to pick 'em
They might smoke like chimneys, but give you their kidneys
Yeah, friends come in handy, but family is family*

Family is family. But here's the thing: family was always a problem for Jesus.

As a *baby*, his paternity was in question, and his birth to an unwed, teenage mother was an embarrassment for many.

As a *child*, he had problems with parental authority. "How could you not know that I would be about my Father's business?" he asked his mother and father when they found him at the temple and reprimanded him for wandering off in the big city (Luke 2:41ff).

"Son, why have you treated us like this?" Mary asked him. What did Mary and Joseph ever do to deserve a smart-mouthed teenager like Jesus?

When he *grew up*, he and his mother were at a wedding a party. When the wine gave out and Mary told Jesus to help, he brushed her off with a “Woman, what does that have to do with you or me?” (John 2:1-11). I don’t know about you, but I will never reach an age when I can talk to my mom like that and not get a bar of soap shoved in my mouth.

And when his ministry got started, he thought nothing of reaching into a family fishing business, and with an abrupt, “Follow me,” demanding that these fishermen abandon their old dad in the boat and join him to wander around the countryside with their buddies (Mark 1:16ff).

“I’ve come to turn father against son, and mother against daughter,” he threatened (Matt. 10:35). And he did.

“My father just died,” said a man to him one day. “I’ll sign up right after the funeral, Jesus.”

“Let the dead bury the dead,” said Jesus — in love, I’m sure. “And follow me!” (Matt. 8:22).

One day, when Jesus was attempting to teach a gathering of folk about the good news, someone interrupted him and said, “Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you.”

Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, “*Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my... mother*” (Mark 3:31-35).

Let’s face it. Jesus and his family were not *The Brady Bunch* type. It’s no wonder Norman Rockwell never painted Jesus. It’s hard to imagine Rockwell finding a way to put the Jesus of scripture in one of his paintings smiling at the Thanksgiving table, hand in hand with Mary and Joseph, offering grace or carving the turkey, isn’t it?

In fact, there is no place in scripture where Jesus says anything special to Mary, *except* here at the end as Jesus hangs on the cross.

“*Woman*,” he says. Even here, he doesn’t call her “mother,” just “woman.” And he doesn’t say how grateful he is for her unwavering love or how great of a mom she’s been or even offer a “Mom, this isn’t your fault... I got myself into this mess.”

It’s as if, as Frederick Buechner has suggested, here at last he finally speaks the awful need he must have always sensed in her. “Behold your son,” he says gently to her about the disciple standing beside her. And then to the disciple, “Behold your mother.”

Since his hands aren’t free, Jesus has to do a lot of the work with his eyes and with his head, which only adds to the intimacy of the scene. Jesus look into her eyes, says, “Woman.” Turns his face to the disciple, looks into his eyes and says, “Here is your

son.” And then says to him, “And here is your mother,” as he turns back to his own mom looking into her eyes again. And when he is through, the adoption is final. “From that hour,” writes John, “the disciple took her into his own home” (19:27).

It was his going away present to her — somebody to be the son that he had no way of being himself.

Most of the time, if this passage is ever taught, it’s taught to us as Jesus obeying the fifth of the ten commandments: “Honor your father and mother...” (Exodus 20:12). “Even at point of death,” we’re told, “Jesus obeyed scripture, set the model, and cared for his mother. And because Jesus took care of his mom, we should take care of ours.”

“Be good to your mothers” is a nice thought, but there’s more happening here than concern for a mother’s welfare.

In all of John’s Gospel the mother of Jesus shows up only twice — two times — and her name is never mentioned. She is never referred to as Mary in John’s gospel. In both appearances, Jesus calls her “Woman,” which, to our ears, sounds rude, but in Jesus’ culture it was an acceptable way for a man to address a woman. It’s not, however, the way a man addresses his *mother*. Good Friday is not the first Mother’s Day. There’s something more going on here.

To her, he says, “Woman, behold your son.” To him, he says, “Behold your mother.” And in so doing, Jesus — the one who was usually disrupting conventional families — is, from the cross, forming a new kind of family.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this:

“While the principalities and powers believe they are tearing his family apart, Jesus is quietly putting it together again. This mother with this son, this past with this future. Although his enemies will succeed in killing him, he will leave no orphans behind. At the foot of the cross, the mother of the old becomes the mother of the new, the beloved disciple becomes the new beloved son” (*Home By Another Way*, 97).

This gathering of hurting people at the foot of the cross is the beginning of the *church*.

Kacey Musgraves is right — family is family. But the idea of family, even a family of faith, can be a tricky metaphor to live into, can’t it? Because not all of us were given good models of family.

The effect our family of origin has on us is profound. The truth is, it’s hard to relate to God as Father if your own father was abusive, or to your church members as family, if your own family made you feel small and forgotten. Those are valid and very real experiences — ones that those of us raised in healthy families ought to be sensitive to when we come into *this* place and gather with *these* people.

But this new family that Jesus, hanging on the cross, starts to pull together gives us a second chance at having a family. It gives us the chance to imagine being part of something new and bigger than our own immediate families.

In the church family, we are given the chance to be embraced by a new Father, a new mother, and new siblings.

And here's the craziest part — when the church is working the way it's supposed to, people are brought together who have absolutely nothing in common, who may even have diametrically different view, who may even dislike each other. When we come into the church, we, who once only cared for those folk who have the same genetics as us, are now made to care for those with whom we have nothing in common except Jesus.

Will Willimon tells this story:

“A bright business man in our town was indicted for looting his company of millions, bringing thousands of his employees to ruin. To prepare for the federal court appearance, he got ‘saved’ and proclaimed to the world — through his publicity agent — that he had ‘found Jesus.’

Well, who should I see on TV a month later, hosting a ‘Christian talk show,’ than this weeping, allegedly penitent thief! There he was, before God and everybody, Bible in hand, pious and sweet as a lamb.

It was more than I could take. ‘The creep!’ I exclaimed to my wife, Patsy. ‘Is there no limit to his hypocrisy? Can you believe this?!’

She, passing through the den, mumbled to me, ‘It’s unbelievable the sort of creeps Jesus is willing to forgive. Even more incredible is the sort of creeps Jesus commands us to be church with.’

She spoke the truth” (*Thank God It's Friday*, 34-35).

Like it or not, Jesus lived, died, and rose again as much for others as for us. And his words here from the cross, call us to be a community of grace in which no one is first and no one is last, no one is left out and no one is left behind.

Isn't it interesting that in this little story, the two people who Jesus binds into this new family are both unnamed throughout the entirety of John's gospel. She is only ever called “the mother of Jesus.” He is only ever called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Never named. Never given a literal identity. Why is that?

Could it be so that we can imagine ourselves standing in their places? So that we can imagine ourselves as part of this new, larger family?

When Father Gregory was asked by his alma mater, Gonzaga University, to come give a talk on a Tuesday night to a thousand people, he said, "Sure."

They said, "Can you bring two homies with you?"

Father Gregory says, "I always like to pick homies who have never flown before, just for the thrill of seeing gang members panicked in the sky."

He said he'd never picked a homie so terrified of flying as this guy, Mario. He was absolutely petrified. In fact, he was hyperventilating before they even boarded the plane. They watched as two flight attendants made their way to the gate, carrying large cups of coffee.

Mario said, in a near panic, "When are we going to board the plane?"

Father Gregory pointed at the coffees and said, "As soon as they sober up the pilots."

He's quick to point out that in their thirty year history of Homeboy Industries, Mario is the most tattooed individual that's ever worked there. His arms are completely sleeved out, neck blackened with the name of his gang, head shaved and covered in tattoos, forehead, checks, chin, eye lids that say "The End," apparently so that when he's lying in his coffin there is no doubt.

He said he'd never been in public with Mario, but as they made their way there, people moved to the other side of the street, mother's clutched their babies, and Father Gregory said, "Wow, isn't that interesting, because if you were to go to Homeboy Ministries on a Monday and ask who's the kindest, most gentle soul who works there, they wouldn't say me. They'll say Mario."

So the night came to do the talk in front of a thousand people, and Father Gregory invited them up to share their stories for five minutes each. They were terrified, but he said they did a good job. Afterwards, Father Gregory invited them up for Q&A.

A woman stood and said, "Yeah, I've got a question. It's for Mario."

Mario stepped up to the mic, tall and skinny, nervously clutching the microphone in front of him: "Yes?"

She says, "Well you say you're a father and that you have a son and daughter who are about to enter their teenage years. What advice do you give them? What wisdom do you impart to them?"

There's a long, awkward pause as Mario, who's terrified, tries to come up with whatever he's going to say, when he finally blurts out, "I just... I just don't want my kids to turn out to be like me."

And there's silence... until the woman stands and through her own tears, says, "Why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you? You are loving. You are kind. You are gentle. You are wise. I hope your kids turn out to be like you."

"And," says Father Gregory, "I watched as a thousand total perfect strangers stood, and they would not stop clapping." And all Mario could do was stand there, holding his face in hands, overwhelmed with emotion that a roomful of strangers had released him from himself, and somehow had been released from themselves, too.

And from his seat at the right hand of God, Jesus looked down on that moment and said to a woman standing up in an audience of thousand people, "Woman, here is your son." And then to the most tattooed disciple who has ever lived, "Here is your mother."

And that night his new family once again grew into something bigger and better than anyone could have imagined.

And that is the miracle of this story. He who had no conventional family, who had no children of his own, is still busy forming the largest family the world has ever known.

So, I say to you: Welcome home.

Amen.