

“Everybody Needs a Family”

John 19: 25-27

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For me, it was the most gripping scene in Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” Jesus was carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem when he fell under the heavy load. Looking to his side, he saw his mother standing nearby.

At this point in the movie, the viewers are taken back to a happier time in the lives of Mary and Jesus. He was a little boy playing near his mother when he falls. Quickly, his mother runs to him, picks him up and embraces him tenderly in her arms. You can only imagine she wished she could do that after he stumbled carrying that heavy cross, if indeed she was nearby.

How much pain can a human heart endure? Mary had to be near the limit as the events of that horrible day unfolded. The sword that Simeon predicted would pierce her heart finally struck a crushing blow.

I wonder if her presence brought Jesus comfort or added more stress to his life. Perhaps both. Surely, however, he would have preferred that she be spared this ordeal, but he knew deep down that she was too loving and responsible to be elsewhere.

And now, it was his turn to be responsible, even as he was dying. As the oldest child in a patriarchal society, it was his responsibility to make sure his mother would be taken care of after he was gone. So John recorded these words, “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.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” John 19: 26-27.

This passage has been the source of a lot of questions, the most obvious being, “Why did he entrust the care of his mother to John and not one of her children?” I don’t know. For some reason, Jesus instructed Mary to look upon John as her son and John to treat Mary as his own mother. There was no doubt Jesus knew John would be good to Mary and provide all she would need.

There is something wholesome and healthy about what happened at that moment that I must point out, though. Dr. Alan Culpepper revealed it to me last year at our Lenten Bible Study. A new family was formed around the cross.

There are times, for a variety of reasons, when people need a new family. The church should be the place where new, healthy relationships are formed.

Everybody needs to be a part of a loving family. I believe this was God’s plan from the beginning of time. He created us to live in community, small and large. He knew life was too demanding and challenging to live in isolation.

In his book, When All You Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough, Harold Kushner tells about watching a small girl and boy building an elaborate sand castle on a beach. When they had nearly finished, a big wave reduced it to a heap of wet sand. He expected the children to burst into tears. Instead, they ran up the shore laughing and holding hands, then sat down to build another castle.

About this scene he writes, “All the structures we spend so much time and energy creating are built on sand. At any time a wave may knock them down. When that happens, the person that has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh and start over.”

This is the role that family plays in our lives. When we need encouragement, comfort, advice, guidance, strength, rest, healing, confidence, self-esteem, security or forgiveness, we turn to family. When we need to celebrate achievements or lick our wounds in failure, we do so among those we trust. When we need a “safe place to fall” after being disappointed, we go home. When we need to be loved unconditionally, we rely upon those that care the most about us. Everybody needs to be a part of a loving family.

Now I recognize that families come in all shapes and sizes in our culture. The traditional home with a mother, father and children surrounded by an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins is not as common as it used to be. Our mobile, fractured and creative society has redefined family. Family now consists of people that choose to share their lives and homes with those that are traveling down common paths. As non-traditional as this may appear, the needs expressed and met through these arrangements are the same as those in traditional homes and families. What this tells me is that everybody needs to be a part of a loving family. Everybody.

However families can dissolve. Death, divorce or distance can take family members away and leave us lonely and empty.

This happened to Mary. Her husband, Joseph, died and now her eldest son that she probably thought would take care of her in her old age was dying. Life as she knew it was abruptly ending, leaving her with an uncertain and anxious future.

The same can happen to us and houses once filled with sweet aromas and hearty laughter can become museums of silent memories. Love and security can be replaced by feelings of abandonment and fear.

Must we live in this haunting vacuum the rest of our lives? Are we doomed to be lonely and frightened forever? No, not according to what Jesus taught us just before he died. New families can be formed at the foot of the cross under his watchful eye.

I interpret this to mean that the church is the place where lonely people broken by ruptured relationships can find healing and hope. This is the place where individuals can find community, large and small. This is the place where stranded travelers can find new companions for their journey. This is the place where homeless people can come in out of the cold and find shelter. This is the place where new families can be formed under the watchful eye of Jesus.

The tenderest weddings that I conduct at this altar include a bride and groom that thought they were going to live alone the rest of their lives. While all weddings are special and young love is exciting, those that produce the most tears include couples that have known heartache and disappointment. Theirs is the joy that accompanies rediscovery and second chances. These couples know what a gift companionship is and how vital families are to our well being. Each time I am a part of developing a new family under the watchful eye of Jesus, I feel humbled and blessed. I feel the church is carrying on the work of our Lord, bringing people together that would otherwise be alone.

Perhaps you are here this morning in need of a spiritual family. You want to be connected to others that will embrace you and love you unconditionally. I invite you to become a part of our church family and encourage you to trust us to be good to you and for you. This is certainly our desire as we gladly enlarge our family to include you.