

The Word of Comfort

by Dr. Mark Smith

March 22, 2009

Mark 3:31-33, John 19:26-27, 1 John 3:11, 16-18

Mk 3:31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.

Mk 3:32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

Mk 3:33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

Mk 3:34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

Mk 3:35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Jn 19:26 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,"

Jn 19:27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

1Jn 3:11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another...

1Jn 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

1Jn 3:17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

1Jn 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

The scene now shifts from the two thieves crucified beside Jesus to those standing beneath the cross. His mother Mary is there, and so too is the *"disciple whom Jesus loved,"* believed traditionally to be John, one of Jesus' closest disciples and the source of the gospel that bears his name. The families of those crucified were usually permitted to remain by the side of their dying relatives. Mary and John looked up and watched him in his agony and wept.

Jesus, aware of their love and sorrow, reached out to the two of them with a word of comfort. That, of course, is true to form for Jesus. Even in his agony and pain, Jesus was thinking of the welfare of others. He prayed for forgiveness for those who were executing him. He offered the promise of paradise to the thief next to him. And here now he comforts two people who meant so much to him.

He comforts them with a word: to Mary he says *"Behold your son"* - referring to John. And to John he says *"Behold your mother."* The dying Jesus comforts them in their sorrow by giving them into the care of each other. He asks John to take Mary into his own home and to provide for her, like a good son. And he asks Mary to give her love and devotion to John, as if he were her own child. They were to be family to each other. They were not physically related to each other, yet they were to be family.

One wonders: where was the rest of Mary's blood family? Joseph no doubt had died by this time, but where were the rest of her children? We know that Jesus had brothers and a sister. Where were they? Granted that may not have yet come to believe in Jesus. But couldn't they stand by their mother in her greatest moment of need?

So what does Jesus do but gives his mother a replacement son and gives John another mother.

It is almost as if Jesus in his dying moment was creating a new holy family - a family based on love and commitment and mutual concern, rather than on ties of blood.

You have heard the expression "*Blood is thicker than water.*" Well, "*love is often thicker than blood.*"

People not physically related to one another can be closer and dearer than blood relatives. I think we understand that. Love is a thicker tie than genetics. Think about your own life experience. Are there those who have nurtured you as a parent might have done? Maybe you think of them as a mom or a dad. Are there those who have always remembered you on special occasions and have always been there to listen to you when you have felt discouraged? You may have said of a friend, "*He's like the brother I never had.*" Has there ever been someone in your life who has stayed beside you through illness or betrayal? Such people accept us as we are, overlooking our faults and forgiving our slights of selfishness. These people become our family by their presence of love, their loyalty and patience and compassion; we truly do feel closer to them than our own blood relatives.

Mary and John were to be that kind of family to each other - a family based not on genetics and birth, but on love and mutual care.

Jesus' third word on the cross enlarges our understanding of family. In fact Jesus was enlarging the concept of family even before the cross. We read about the time when Jesus was preaching to a crowd. Some close to Jesus reported to him that his mother and brothers were looking for him. In response Jesus asked, "*Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*"

If we have faith in Christ and seek to follow him in all things, we are Jesus' mother, brother and sister....part of a holy family - his family.

That holy family is called the church. We are truly brothers and sisters to one another. Our Lord from the cross points us to the people sitting in the chairs around us saying "*Behold your mothers and fathers! Behold your sisters and brothers! Love one another. Encourage and support and strengthen one another. I'll comfort you*" says Jesus, "*by giving you into one another's care.*"

Think about this. How does the Lord comfort us in trouble and grief? Surely through his promises in scripture. And he offers us a sense of his presence with us through the Holy Spirit. But more often than not, he chooses to comfort us through the people he has placed around us – which is why he has called us into community. We are people who need people as we face the crises and sorrows of this life; they mediate God's presence and love to us. *"Shared sorrow is half a sorrow"* says the proverb. Our brothers and sisters in Christ become a source of comfort and strength and courage. God gives us to each other, just as our Lord gave Mary and John to each other. We are family. We are not meant to walk alone.

I was certainly the recipient of this extended family's care when my mother passed away two years ago. What a comfort you all were! I was never so glad to be part of such a wonderful community. God truly comforted me through you.

One of the great preachers of our day is Fred Craddock. Craddock tells about a time he went to a church to do a series of worship services on Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday morning. He writes:

When I pulled into the parking lot of the church, a funeral was concluding. People were moving to their automobiles; the hearse was still there. The minister saw me, recognized me, and motioned for me to come over. I didn't want to intrude; I was just waiting until it was over. He was standing next to the widow. He introduced her, he introduced me, and I felt awkward. I said to her, 'This is no time for you to be meeting strangers. I'm sorry, and I'm really sorry about your loss.' Her husband had been killed in a car wreck and left her with four children. I said, 'I know this is a very difficult time for you.'

She said, "It is. So I won't be at the services tonight, but I'll be there tomorrow night, and I'll be there Sunday morning."

I said, "Oh you don't need to."

"Yes, I do." she replied.

I said, "Well, what I meant was, I know it's a very hard time."

And she said, "I know it's hard. It's already hard, but you see this is my church, and they're going to see that my children and I are okay." [source: Joe Dunham]

What a beautiful thing! This church is at its best when we are acting like a loving family. That is not always easy to do perhaps with 400 plus members. We are a big family -- bigger than we used to be. We will not know everyone's name. But still we can be brothers and sisters to one another by caring as best we can. We are family when we

take a meal to someone who is shut in or home after surgery. We are family when we send cards and visit those who are sick or who are grieving. We are family when we pray for each other. We are family when we can help a brother or sister who is in financial need and is dealing with unemployment.

We do not always do these things very well. We could always do better. The main thing is that we have got to continue to care for each other. Our responsibility is pretty basic. As John puts it:

^{1Jn 3:11} This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another...

^{1Jn 3:16} This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

^{1Jn 3:17} If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

^{1Jn 3:18} Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

In this third word from the cross, Our Lord comforts his mother Mary and the beloved disciple John by giving each into the care of the other. So, too does he provide for our comfort and encouragement. He makes us members of a family - *his* family. May we be mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers to one another.

Prayer: "What a tender picture, O God, of the life in your Son. How different it is from the world, where we dwell in isolation and loneliness. Grant that we may truly care for others in the fellowship, and share whatever we have with them, for you have made them our brothers and sisters...for your Son's sake. Amen."