

“The Church & the Cross”
John 19:23-37
March 21, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We return this morning to John 19:23-37. Last Lord’s Day we looked at this passage and considered the relationship between the cross and our individual guilt. This morning we will consider the relationship between the cross and the Church.

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{19:23} When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, ²⁴ so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

So the soldiers did these things, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. ³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵ He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. ³⁶ For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we do believe that your word
is firmly fixed forever, with you, in the heavens.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations,

you have made this world and it stands as you will it to.
Lord, as your people, help us to never forget your precepts,
Because by them you have given us life.
Lord, we are yours, save us,
for we have sought your ways.
Grant us life now through this your word.
In Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:89, 90, 93, 94]

Introduction

As I said, last week we looked at our text and considered what it had to say about our individual guilt.

But this morning we return to this passage because it also has a lot to say about our life together as the covenant community of God – as the Church of Jesus Christ.

As we look, we will see three things that John tells us about the church, by the way that he recounts the crucifixion of Jesus.

First, we'll see that the Church is a Family. Second, we'll see that the Church is a Bride. And third, we'll see that the Church is a redeemed community.

The Church is a Family

So, the first thing we see is that the church is a family.

And we see that in verses twenty-six through twenty-seven. After John introduces the women who were present, he writes:

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

The focus here is on Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the other disciple there, the “disciple whom [Jesus] loved,” which is the apostle John's way of referring to himself, as the author of this gospel. [Carson, 473, 616]

What is the meaning of these words Jesus has for his mother and for John? Well, D.A. Carson explains – he writes: “The words Jesus uses, ‘here is your son ... Here is your mother,’ are reminiscent of [a] legal adoption formulae.” If Jesus was the primary breadwinner for his family before his ministry began, then what Jesus is doing from the cross is to make sure his mother is cared for after his death. [Carson, 616-617]

And by doing this the way he does, Jesus both affirms the importance of the human family, and also puts its importance in perspective.

So first, he affirms the importance of the family. Jesus, even as he carries out his cosmic mission on the cross, is here giving special attention to the needs of his biological mother. In doing this, Jesus affirms the responsibilities that family members have for one another, including the duty of adult children to care for the needs of their elderly parents. [Augustine, Homily 119.2]

But then, as soon as Jesus does that, he also puts the importance of the family in perspective.

Because when he needs to find someone to care for his biological mother, Jesus does *not* turn to his biological brothers, and he does not direct Mary to look to her biological sons.

Remember, Jesus did have half-brothers – children of Mary and Joseph – who were still alive. And in the ancient world, those biological siblings would be expected to care for a widow like Mary. Why then, does Jesus entrust his mother to the care of John instead? [Carson, 616-617]

Well, in John's gospel the picture we get is that at this point Jesus's brothers were not yet believers. We are told in chapter seven that they were thoroughly skeptical of Jesus, and we have been given no indication that that has changed.

Now, it is true that by the time we get to Acts 1:14, sometime between Jesus's ascension to heaven and the day of Pentecost, by then Jesus's brothers will be numbered among the believers in Jerusalem. But we are not told they were believers before then. In fact, it seems likely that it was Jesus's appearance to James after his resurrection (mentioned in First Corinthians 15:7) that brought Jesus's brothers to faith. [Carson, 617 n.1]

But at this point – here, on the day of Jesus's death – it seems that Jesus's brothers (Mary's sons) were not yet believers.

And when we realize that, the weight of Jesus's statements to Mary and to John should sink in.

Jesus is saying here that at that point, when John is a believer, and James the son of Mary is not, that John is more truly family to Mary than James her biological son is. Jesus is saying that what unites John and Mary is stronger than what unites James and Mary.

Again, family does matter – we see that in Jesus's care of Mary here, we see it in the fact that he will appear to James after his resurrection from the dead – but family matters less than faith.

In First Timothy 3:15 the Apostle Paul says that the Church is the household of God – the family of God. We can sometimes read that as a sort of vaguely sentimental statement that the church has some family-like qualities. But that's not what Paul means. Because in Ephesians 3:15 Paul tells us that it is from the Fatherhood of God that all fatherhood and all families receive their name and have their source. [Simpson, 78-79]

In other words, God's fatherhood is more truly a fatherhood than any human fatherhood on earth is. Because all human fatherhoods are meant to be a reflection of God's fatherhood. And in the

same way, the family of God is more truly a family than any human family, because all human families are meant to reflect God's family, the Church.

Which is what lies at the heart of Jesus's words here. Mary loved James, her biological son. But at that moment, John was more her son than James was, because he was her spiritual son – her son in the faith of Jesus Christ.

We love family here at Faith Presbyterian Church. In a culture like ours that is devaluing the institution of the family, it is important that we hold to the biblical truth of the importance of the family.

But as we react against a culture that under-values the family, we need to beware lest we swing in the opposite direction and begin to over-value the human family. For that can be idolatry. If we ever place our ties to one another through our human families as being more important than our ties to one another spiritually, then we have flipped things on their head and made an idol of the family.

The family is important. The family matters. But even when it is functioning just as it should – even when it is the picture of love that God desires to be, in many ways our families are still only a reflection. They are still only an image of the truest family: the family of God.

God's family outranks human families. That means a few things.

First, it should shape how we relate to other believers within our families. Nothing should be more important to you in your family than your shared faith in Christ. There are many things that make up our family identities and our family cultures – and that is good, that is as it should be. But none of those things should ever outrank your shared faith: not your heritage, not your traditions, not your worldly success, not the kind of work you do, not the way you raise your kids, not your hobbies, not where you choose to live – *none of those things* should outrank or trump the unity you have in your shared faith in Christ. And whenever a family rift occurs, your shared faith, and your relationship in the family of Christ is what should reunite you again, more than anything else does.

Second, this should shape how we relate to unbelievers in our families. We should relate to them by both acknowledging the distance, but also continuing to reach out in love. And Jesus does both of those things here.

First, by putting his mother in John's care, Jesus is forcing her to acknowledge the spiritual gulf that exists between her and her other sons. We too must acknowledge that gulf. If we fail to do so, then we either believe ourselves or we imply to our unbelieving family members that maybe allegiance to Christ is *not* the most important thing in our lives.

But second, even as Jesus forces that recognition, he also continues to reach out. And we know this because James, his unbelieving brother, was one of the first people that the resurrected Christ appeared to. And so Jesus models for us how we are to continue to lovingly reach out to our family members who have not yet come to acknowledge Christ as their truest King.

This passage tells us how we should relate to believers and nonbelievers within our human family.

But even more centrally than that, this passage should shape how we relate to the church and to other Christians.

The local church – a congregation like ours – should never first and foremost be a shared affinity group. It should never first be a group who likes a certain kind of music, or a certain style of preaching, or a certain theological outlook, or a certain political perspective, or a certain posture towards the unbelieving world. Of course all those things may factor in as we first choose a church, but none of them should be primary to who a congregation is, or what we expect to get from the church.

Before the church is any of those other things, the church is to be the household of God our Father. Which means we are family. And that should trump a lot of differences. That should overcome a lot of disagreements. And that should also penetrate a lot of barriers.

It means that the church should be a place where we let others see us as we really are ... not as we want to project to others. It means the church should be a place where we expect to have to deal with the messes of others' lives. It means that the church should be a place where we accept help and attention that we might otherwise find humiliating ... and it should be a place where we give help and attention that we might otherwise find unreasonable.

Is that how you view your relationship to this congregation? And if not, why not? Why is it different? Why do you hold back your help? Or why do you hold back your needs? Or why do you hide who you really are and project something different? Or why do you let lesser issues divide you from others?

That's the first thing we see: The Church of Christ is the truest family.

The Church is a Bride

And the second thing we see is that the Church of Christ is a bride.

And to see that, we need to turn to verse thirty-four, and the water and the blood.

In that verse, the Roman soldiers checked whether Jesus was really dead or not by piercing his side with a spear. And when they did, "at once" John writes, "blood and water" "came out."

As we said last week, medical experts disagree on what organ inside Jesus may have been pierced, but in any case, one thing John clearly means to demonstrate is that Jesus really was dead. [Carson, 623]

But we also said that John is probably doing more than that. Because John's gospel is full of double meanings, and it's hard to believe that this is an exception.

Last Lord's Day we discussed John Calvin's claim that in the water and the blood that flowed from Jesus's side, John intended for us to see a symbol of all the Old Testament washings and sacrifices that were summed up and fulfilled in Jesus's death. [Calvin, 240]

But Calvin doesn't stop there. In the water and the blood Calvin also saw a reference to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. For just as the Old Testament washings and sacrifices pointed forward to the cross of Christ, so now the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper point us back to the cross of Christ, so Calvin repeats the statement that here the "sacraments have flowed from Christ's side". [Calvin, 241; See also Augustine, Homily 120.2]

And as we think about what that means, it's helpful to realize that the Bible does not present baptism and the Lord's Supper to us primarily in individualistic terms, but in communal terms. Baptism doesn't just identify individual Christians, but it marks the boundaries of the Church. The Lord's Supper isn't just a means of grace to individual Christians, but it is primarily a shared meal of the Church of Christ. In a sense, the sacraments form and identify the Church as the People of God – as the Bride of Christ.

Which is why Augustine sees in the water and the blood a picture of the Church as Christ's Bride.

Augustine, preaching to his congregation, explains it like this. First, he points them back to the Garden of Eden and the creation of Eve. He says: "The first woman was created from the side of the man as he slept and [she] was called the life and mother of the living." Augustine reminds his congregation how God formed the first woman – the first bride – by causing a deep, death-like sleep to fall over Adam, and then God took a rib from Adam's side, and from it he formed the woman – the bride of the First Adam.

Augustine then turns back to Jesus – the Second Adam in our passage. And he says that here "this second Adam bowed his head and fell asleep on the cross, so that from there a spouse would be fashioned from what flowed from the sleeper's side." [Augustine, Homily 120.2]

Now, that level of symbolism might make some uncomfortable, but it is not difficult to see how this could fit with John's intentions here. John is writing his gospel over 50 years after the church and its sacraments had been established, and he's writing decades after Paul's teachings on Jesus as the Second Adam and the Church as the Bride of Christ had spread throughout the early church. [Köstenberger, 290]

To me, it's hard to believe that as John reflected on those themes, and as he chose how to describe what he saw at the death of Christ, that he was not intentionally presenting us with a beautiful image of the creation of a new Eve, the Church, from the side of the Second Adam.

Just as the First Adam fell into a deep sleep, and his bride was created from his side, so now the Second Adam falls into the sleep of death, and the Church, his Bride, is formed out of the cleansing and the life that flows from his side.

All of which points us to that second truth: that the Church is a Bride.

And a bride has her identity as a bride based on her relationship with her groom. Which means that primary to the identity of the Church is its relationship with Christ. As a church our relationship to our groom – our relationship to Christ – must be core to our identity.

That means that who we are as a people is not first and foremost found in our moral stances, or our liturgical preferences, or our cultural positioning – as important as those things may be. But instead, what shapes our identity is our relationship to Jesus: his love for us, and then our love for him. *That* is to be core to who we are as a church. Is it? Is that the first thing someone would say about us – that central to who we are is Christ’s love for us and our love for him?

That is what our text tells us *should be* central to who we are, because the second thing we see here is that the Church is a Bride.

The Church is Redeemed

Which brings us to the third and final thing we see in this passage about the Church, which is that the Church is redeemed. The Church is a redeemed community.

And this is essential. Because if we don’t grasp this, if this is not at the root and the foundation of our understanding of the Church, then the first two things we’ve discussed can go horribly wrong.

Because if we accept that the Church is a family and the Church is a bride, then this last point tells us *what kind of* family, and *what kind of* bride the Church is supposed to be.

Because not all families are good. There are bad families. There are destructive families, and hurtful families, and angry families, and cold families, and abusive families, and the list can go on. There are families that hurt one another in all kinds of ways. You have all seen this, and many of you have experienced it yourself.

Families can hurt one another in this world.

And, of course, Mary and John had the opportunity for that as well. Think about what Mary could have said to John here. John is at the cross in chapter nineteen, and that’s something. But where was he in the garden? Where was he when Jesus was so deeply distressed before the hour of his trial? When Jesus singled John out as one of his closest friends, how did John respond? He fell asleep, leaving Jesus to cry out to God alone.

Where was John after that, at Jesus’s arrest in the garden? Where was he when things got dangerous? Again, he was absent: this time fleeing to save himself.

Jesus tells Mary that she is to look to John for support, and protection, and provision. And if we put ourselves in Mary’s position, we could easily imagine the indignant and cutting words that may have come from her mouth: “This guy? You want me to relate to this guy as family? You what me to rely on him? To call him my son? Are you kidding?” And then we could imagine her turning from Jesus to John and saying: “John, what is your deal, anyway? What is wrong with you? After all you saw, after all Jesus said to you, after all he gave you, how could you abandon

my son like you did? How could you do that? And how could you ever imagine I'd accept you as a son in my life?"

And if she did say that we could imagine John's response. Because Mary's record wasn't perfect either. In Mark 3:31 we read about Jesus's mother and brothers coming to see Jesus in the midst of his earthly ministry. And a little bit before that, in verse 21 we learn that the reason they came was because they thought Jesus was out of his mind and they wanted to take him home. John was already one of Jesus's apostles when that happened. And so we can easily imagine John's response to Mary if she had gone after him:

"What's wrong with me? No – what's wrong with *you*, Mary? What's *your* deal? Yeah, I faltered after following Jesus for three years. *You raised him for thirty years, Mary!* And when things got intense, you called him crazy. You watched him grow up and never sin! You had an angel appear to you and to Joseph. You were there at his first miracle. What more did you need, Mary? But even with all that, when we were just starting out, when things were tough and we had scribes and Pharisees questioning and harassing us, you show up and completely undermine Jesus with your doubts. I was there for him when you were letting people believe he was insane."

Such an interaction might sound over-the-top ... but is it? If we know what people are often like ... doesn't that kind of response almost feel more realistic than what we see in our text?

But then why don't they say it? Why don't they attack each other? They're certainly not lacking in ammunition!

The reason they don't attack one another is because both Mary and John know the *kind of* family they are. They are a *redeemed* family. And nothing could have driven that point home more firmly than where Jesus was when he declared them to be family. He did it from the cross. It was on the cross that Jesus declared their family bond. Because their family bond was made in the redemption that flowed from the cross of Christ.

What united Mary and John was not only their mutual faith in Christ, but their mutual need for Christ. They both needed the redemption that only Christ could give. They both had failed Jesus in real ways. They both knew they did not deserve to be part of the household of God. They both knew they deserved to be cast out. And yet, through the cross of Christ, they had been called into the family of God anyway. And because they knew that – because they knew it in their bones – how could they stand in judgment against a spiritual brother or sister who fell short and needed redemption just like they did? How could they attack or neglect someone for being unworthy when they were unworthy?

John and Mary were not just family ... they were redeemed family. And they could embrace one another because they knew that, and they truly believed it.

What about us, Faith Presbyterian Church?

How much do we resemble John and Mary in the account we read in our text? And how much do we resemble that alternative possibility that I've laid out for you?

To be sure, like any church, we are a mix of the two. There are extraordinary examples of love here that show forth the gospel and we should rejoice in that fact.

But we can also find plenty of examples of that alternative option, can't we?

Some of that has especially come out this year, hasn't it? Whether we have said it to their faces, or said it to someone else, or just said it in our own minds, we have all done a lot of looking at other people ... even other people in our congregation ... even other people in this room with us right now – we have looked at them and we have said or we have thought “What is your deal? What is wrong with you?”

And whether in our words, or our deeds, or even just our thoughts, we have pushed them away. We have maybe even despised them. We have maybe even cultivated contempt for our brothers and sisters.

And some of that animosity, for some of you, may not be new in the past year. It might be something you've struggled with for years.

Who is it for you? And what has your contempt looked like? Has it occurred in your mind and heart? In your words? In your deeds?

Brothers and sisters, we have all done this.

And to the extent that we have – to the extent that we have allowed judgmental contempt to grow in our hearts – to that extent, we have forgotten what kind of family we are. We have forgotten that we are a *redeemed* family. We have forgotten that *none of us* deserve to be here. And *every one of us* deserves dismissive contempt.

But instead, we received mercy. Instead we received grace. Instead Christ died on the cross to redeem us. And from that redemption he formed his family, the Church.

And if that is so – if that is why we are here, not because we deserve it, but because Christ redeemed us from our sins – then how can we stand in judgment on others who got here the same way we did? How can we continue to harbor judgmental contempt?

How we deal with that judgmental contempt ... both in the year ahead and in the years to come – whether we hold onto it, or put it to death before the cross of Christ – that will play a significant role in defining what kind of church we are ... what kind of spiritual family we will be. Christ, from the cross, reminds us that we are to be a *redeemed* family. How do you need to better embrace that truth?

So, first, the fact that the Church is a redeemed community tells us what kind of family we are to be.

But then second, along with that, the fact that the Church is a redeemed community also tells us what kind of bride we are to be.

Because there are bad brides. Some of you have seen this. Some of you have maybe been this. The term “bridezilla” is sometimes used. A bad bride is a bride-to-be who starts to alienate everyone around her in the demands she makes for her wedding.

Now, of course, relationships always get a bit strained under the stress of wedding preparation. That doesn’t make someone a bad bride.

What makes them a bad bride, what makes them a “bridezilla” is when everything starts to become about them. They become the focus of the wedding: *their* appearance, *their* plans, *their* celebration. It becomes about *them* and not their relationship to the groom.

Unfortunately, the Church can be like that. The Church can act like a bridezilla.

On one level, maybe that’s not that surprising. As the Church of Christ, we are pretty important. John himself says so in the Book of Revelation: he describes the Church as the City of God, decked out in every kind of jewel. He describes it as being filled with the glory of God. He describes it as being prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, [Revelation 21] so that a great multitude, beholding her cries out: the “Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure.” John then adds that “the fine linen” of the Bride “is the righteous deeds of the saints.” [Revelation 19:7-8]

The Bride of Christ – the Church – can be beautifully adorned. She is clothed with both the glory of God, and the splendor of her own good deeds.

And with that, she can be tempted to become a bad bride – to become infatuated with herself, obsessed with her own appearance, focused on her own glory, making herself the center of things.

But that is not what she is called to. Her calling is better summed up in the hymn “The Sands of Time Are Sinking” based on the words of Samuel Rutherford. There we read of the Church:

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom’s face;
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of Grace;
not at the crown he giveth, but on his pierced hand:
the Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel’s land.”

What keeps the Church from becoming arrogantly obsessed with herself – from prideful promoting herself before others? It is the knowledge that the cross of Christ is the source of all we are and all we have. It is the knowledge that we do not deserve the glory that we receive as God’s people. It is the knowledge that even our good works are gifts from Christ, for we never could have done them on our own.

What keeps us, as the Church, from being a bad and self-centered bride is the knowledge that we are a *redeemed* bride.

And brothers and sisters, we must remember this.

We love our church here, at Faith. And in itself, that is not bad. But sometimes we become a little too fixated with ourselves. Sometimes we like looking at our own reflection more than we should. Sometimes we get a bit obsessive with ourselves. Sometimes we think we are better or more important than we really are. Sometimes we can become a bridezilla church.

You must know that this can be true of us.

And when it is, the only remedy is to remember that we are a redeemed church – to remember that we sprang forth not from our own efforts, and not from our own merits, but from the side of our crucified Lord. We must constantly remember that we are a bride who owes its existence to the crucifixion of Jesus.

He has given us the tools to remember. He has given us the water and the blood. Every one of us has entrance to the Church only through the water of baptism – a reminder that without redemption we are too sinful and unclean to be a part of the Bride of Christ. And every Lord's Day we come again to Christ's table, and he holds before us a reminder that we, as a church, are only sustained moment by moment because his body was broken and his blood was shed for us on the cross, so that we might be redeemed.

The only way for us to avoid becoming a vain and arrogant anti-bride of Christ is to remember that we are a redeemed bride of Christ, and to let that truth sink in in such a way that we look on our groom in love, and adoration, and self-forgetful gratitude, because he has redeemed us from the desolation we deserved, and he has made us his beloved.

For we are beloved by God ... but not because we deserved it.

Christ has redeemed us. He has made us into his family. He has made us into his bride.

Let us be who he has called us to be, by fixing our eyes on him, by rooting ourselves in the cross, and by never forgetting what it cost our Lord to make us into his redeemed Church.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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