

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 23, 2025

Center us in your breath, oh God, in these moments. Help us to know that you are as close to us as our very next breath. Bring your peace and your comfort to us in this time, and bring your challenge and your correction to us as well. Help us to hear your word as it is read and proclaimed this day. Help us to be your faithful people in response. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

We continue in our Lenten sermon series this morning, The Seven Last Words of Jesus. We've been in the Gospel of Luke for several weeks now. We move this morning to the Gospel according to John. We are in the 19th chapter. We're going to read verses 26 and 27. Just a bit of context for us. Jesus, as he is for each of these last sayings, is on the Cross. Scripture tells us that he looks down and sees a group of people gathered there at the foot of the Cross standing beside each other, and then we get verse 26. Let us listen to God's word to each of us and indeed to the Church.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So in 77 days this sanctuary will be ordained in red. There will be a group of elders and deacons who will come forward at some point in that worship service, and they will be ordained into service in the Church of Jesus Christ through Idlewild. And we will celebrate with them the gift of the spirit that has fallen fresh upon them, because we will celebrate together Pentecost. Many of y'all are familiar with Pentecost. It's one of my favorite liturgical holidays. It's often referred to as the birthday of the Church. Pentecost helps us to remember what we see in Acts 2 where God's faithful were gathered together and the spirit of God descended upon them, and each of them began to speak in languages that were not their own. They could understand what everyone else was saying, and they were awestruck by this experience; and many a preacher, myself included, have often claimed that that is indeed the birth of the church. This morning I want to posit to you that the story that we have just read could actually be understood as the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ. That is because Jesus creates community through these words, these last words of his, at the foot of the Cross. Jesus specifically creates community for his mother and for the Beloved Disciple. To his mother he says "Here is your son." To the Beloved Disciple "Here is your mother." This is one of the gifts of the Cross. New relationships are born. New community is constituted at the foot of the Cross. The relationship born between the Beloved Disciple and Mary—we might understand it to be the first fruit of the crucifixion. Now Jesus will accomplish much, and God will accomplish much through the Cross, but those accomplishments begin with creating relationship, creating community, and a specific kind of community—a community born

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out of suffering, specifically the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's important for us to understand that that's the sort of community that is born. We have a mother and we have a best friend peering upon one who is suffering in death, in deep agony and pain; and it is that one in the midst of that pain and suffering who births relationship and community. And it's important for us to note because there is something different about community that is formed from the shared experience of the Cross, the shared experience of pain. There is something different about community formed around the death of Jesus. It is a type of community where sacrificial love must take center stage. It must be the grounding...grounding value of the community that is formed. These are relationships grounded in a God who enters the suffering of the world, is marked by it, and yet moves through it with grace and with power. This is the gift that Jesus gives to those standing at the foot of the Cross, the gift of relationship, of being known, of ultimately being healed, because that's what happens in community. We become known more fully for who we are, and y'all have experienced this, hopefully, in one way or another. Experiences of shared pain or suffering—they bind us to each other ever more closely than we could imagine we could be bound to another. I've experienced this in my own life. I speak about it often, about losing my mother in adolescence. When I meet someone else, and I ask them about their family of origin, and they say, "Well, my dad's around, but my mother passed when I was a teenager," I have an immediate connection with them, right? I don't know what their experience was like, and they don't know what mine was like, but I know something of what their experience was like, and they know something of what my experience was like. They know something about an event that changed my world, and I know something about an event that changed their world. And this is true for you if you have navigated divorce and then you've met someone who's done the same, if you are someone who has navigated addiction and met someone who is doing the same, if you are someone who struggles with depression and you meet someone who struggles as well, or with grief or with infertility, or if you are a survivor of abuse. If you have to navigate physical and mental health issues, and you meet another who is navigating the same thing or something similar, you don't know their full story, but you know something of their story, and they don't know your full story but they know something of it; and that's what is happening between Mary and the Beloved Disciple. The Beloved Disciple doesn't know what it's like to grieve the loss of a son, and Mary doesn't know what it's like to grieve the loss of a best friend, but they know something of losing Jesus together. They know something of witnessing to his pain together, and there is something that is born within that specific type of community that can bring about transformation, that can bring about healing, that can bring about being known in a way that no other relationship can. In the previous life I knew a man who served our country in the military, and the way his spouse describes it he came home a different man...came home from service a different man. He struggled with many mental health issues for years. His wife confided in me one time, "He didn't start getting better, my husband didn't start

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getting better until he started meeting with other veterans, those who had served in the same place he had served, smelled the same smells, heard the same sounds, experienced the same trauma.” It was only in that specific kind of community that he began—that specific kind of relationship—that he began to experience healing.

I think that's a bit of what Jesus is trying to inaugurate here as I believe he birthed the Church. Jesus's words had a purpose to the people at the foot of the Cross. He desired to care for them and to, for them, set up a caring network before he died, so that through his experience of pain and grief they might be bound together in relationship. And that means that the good news, part of the good news of the Cross even, not even the empty tomb, but even the Cross is that God doesn't desire that we navigate pain and suffering alone. God desires that we navigate pain and suffering in community. In the darkest moments of my life I do not want to be alone, and in the darkest moments of your life Jesus does not want you to be alone either. And so we birth this relational community that we come a couple of thousand years later to call the Church, and it looks a lot different; but we gather at the foot of the Cross every week, and we claim that there is something unique about relationships that are born from experiencing the pain and suffering that Jesus experienced in the world. Those are the relationships that he authored there at the very beginning. Before the Church would be born by the spirit, it was born with the final words of Jesus so that we might not carry our pain alone, so that we might not grieve alone.

We've come to know over time that there is healing and care that comes from community. I've experienced that personally, and I know that I'm in a very privileged position in the Church with this robe and stole and position and all that sort of stuff. I get it. But even in spaces where I haven't been clergy, I've experienced a different type of community from the Church. When I've been willing, brave enough to bring my own pain and hurt and suffering into the community of faith, I have been blessed with adopted mothers and fathers, adopted brothers and sisters and siblings. I've been blessed with family that has surrounded me to help me heal. Perhaps you know what that's like as well. Maybe with the pew family or with others. That doesn't mean that those familial relationships are always easy. They're not. But what they can be, if we are brave enough, is authentic and true reflections of the community that Jesus tried to birth at the foot of the Cross.

Studying this text this week made my social media feed even more confounding to me. I know my social media feeds are not the same as yours. Mine's full of Christian influencers and Nascar and professional wrestling. Yours are full of whatever your feeds are full of, right, but I've witnessed something in this Christian influence or culture that I get to see there in that virtual space, this peculiar, I'm going to call it an attack that's been rising, this energy of attack that's

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been rising specifically amongst evangelical Christians, not all, not all, but some. There's an attack being made against empathy. Maybe you've heard this and seen this. In some circles empathy is now considered—Christian circles—empathy is now considered a sin. They say that empathy aligns us with hell. A prominent theologian, Joe Rigney, just released a book entitled *The Sin of Empathy*. Another just released a book entitled *Toxic Empathy*. The argument is that empathy makes us listen so closely to the stories of the marginalized that it makes us change the way we move through the world, and that is scary to some of these Christians. But I don't believe empathy is a sin. When I read this text, I believe that it becomes one of the truest reflections of being a follower of Jesus Christ, because it invites us, as Jesus did in those moments, to enter into the suffering of our neighbor, not simply at a distance but in community. And as we enter into the suffering of our neighbor, we enter also into the suffering of our God. And we, as Courtney shared in our confessional sequence, we move through that suffering and in it are returned to our God. That doesn't mean that entering into the suffering or the pain of another is easy. It takes energy. We don't always have that energy. Anytime I am resistant to bringing my full self to this place, I remember the words of Marjorie Thompson. “If the Church is not a community in which our brokenness,” and I will add and pain, “if the Church is not a community in which our brokenness and pain can be acknowledged honestly, then neither will it be a community where healing takes place.” And if there's anything that I believe our God hopes will happen through the Cross, it is that healing might take place. Our God hopes for your pain and for the pain of your neighbor to be transformed by our God's healing power. What that requires of us, though, is an authentic examination of that pain, an unwillingness to abandon the foot of the Cross, to peer upon the one that suffered and see our own suffering, the suffering of our neighbors. I think Jesus birthed the Church here in the Gospel according to John so that we might find relationships in our pain, that we might extend ourselves in relationship to others in their pain, and that in so doing, the pain of the Cross might indeed heal the world.

77 days from now we're going to celebrate the birth of the Church through the very spirit of God descending. This morning I celebrate the birth of the Church as Jesus's words fall to the foot of the Cross. “Here is your son; here is your mother; here is your sibling; here is your parent.” You are bound together in the pain and suffering of the world. I'm calling you not to look away from it, but to be bound ever more closely by it, for being bound to one another will ultimately lead to your healing and the healing of the world. And this healing—it is at the heart of the Cross, the heart of the relationships we call the Church, and it is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for these words. Thanks be to God for relationships. Thanks be to God for healing that comes forth from them and by our Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.

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