

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Lent - A - 3/2/08 – Ps 68:5-6; Jn 19:25-27 – Community: The Mystery and Miracle of God’s Love**

Let me begin by telling you about a family I’ve been supporting. The husband has been battling lung cancer for over 18 months and both he and his wife realize that their options are narrowing. As they have throughout their lives, they draw strength and encouragement from each other. They are each other’s best friend, love being together, and quickly admit that they’ve lived a blessed life. When asked what concerns them most, each responded: “Leaving the other.” Knowing he won’t be there to support her, the husband has done everything in his power to insure her provision. He is confident that their close friends will step in and be there for her. He’s given her permission to find another partner after he’s gone so she won’t be alone. She simply cannot imagine life without him. They talk openly and lovingly about this transition and seek to reassure the other.

Each of us has our own story to tell about leave taking and what that is like, about Living Wills, Power of Attorney, Health Directives, and Estate planning. All of this is about providing for others and easing the transition. Each of us knows that the sting of death is the separation it brings, our being robbed of a relationship that we valued, and finding ourselves “alone” in the world.

In this word from the cross, Jesus’ concern goes beyond himself and focuses on his compassion for his mother and his followers. He knows that we need to walk together in community. Here is where we find support when we’re weak, encouragement when we despair, affirmation when we doubt, direction when we feel lost, faith when we find it difficult to trust God’s promises, forgiveness when we err, and love when we feel alone. In this word from the cross, Jesus creates community for both his mother and followers, knowing that it will be the community that will sustain them in his absence.

From the very beginning, God recognized this need for human connection. In Genesis 2:18, we read: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper for his partner.” As a result human community was formed. When God called Abraham, God said (Gen. 12:2): “I will make of you a great nation . . .” While God calls us as individuals, God also places us in a community. We need each other; we walk together in this journey of faith. In Psalm 68:5-6, we witness God’s concern for orphans and widows and the need to find a home in which they can live. That is the responsibility of the community. Jesus called 12 men to become his inner circle of friends, and when the Apostle Paul began his missionary journey, he always had a companion.

Why is community so difficult when it’s so desirable and matters so much? Could it be because community requires two things that go against our experience and expectations? It requires trust, which is foundational to intimacy, and it requires sacrifice as it calls us to focus not on ourselves but on the other person standing before us. While we crave human connection, our past experience of being betrayed, excluded, manipulated, and disappointed creates a barrier. We’re hesitant to risk being hurt again. The place that offers us the best chance for healing and wholeness is also the very place where we often are wounded. In a world that is turned in upon itself, where we are told to look out for ourselves first, Jesus calls us to be servants, to give from our resources as we provide what others need, be it physical, emotional or spiritual, and that means sacrifice.

The words from the Psalm reading and cross remind us that God brings people into our lives unexpectedly; people who need family, a friend, a connection; people who might feel orphaned or widowed in the world. Four years ago a freshman at UNCG, a young woman Kay and I had met on a Teens Encounter Christ weekend, called and asked if she could stay with us. She had lost her funding and couldn’t remain at the university without help. With our two sons being away at school, Kay had been sensing God’s call to be more involved in college ministry. This wasn’t what she or I were expecting, but it was what God placed at our doorstep. So we opened our house and hearts and took her in, and in so doing have received a blessing.

Many of you have done the same: welcoming single members or older adults into your home for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners, gathering in hospital waiting rooms to pray and support a friend or class member while a spouse underwent surgery, gathering in the parlor for prayer, Bible study and sharing the journey of faith, working side-by-side to deliver meals, prepare a breakfast, or build a house. Community is formed when we allow the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and hands and make a space for others in trusted relationships.

God brings people into our lives unexpectedly; people who need family, a friend, a connection. Such was Mary's situation at the foot of the cross, and that of the orphans and widows in our psalm reading. The people God places on our doorstep might be a co-worker, the person sitting right next to us, a child, an older adult, a homeless person, or a next door neighbor. What they need is more than a handshake, a hello and how-are-you. What they need is our willingness to open our hearts and hands and create a space where they can come and be heard without judgment, where they can be cared for without thought of paying back, where they can ask questions and have doubts without being given simple answers, where we can wait together and walk together and let the mystery and miracle of God's love bring healing and hope, where we can help each other keep the flame of faith alive and take it seriously so that it can grow and become stronger in us.