



John 19:17-18, 25-27
CrossWords
Compassion

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This morning we continue our series of messages in Lent looking at the last words of Christ, as we move toward Resurrection Sunday. Today, we're in John 19, which we just heard. Verses 17 and 18 share some of the same information from the last couple messages, and I've included them this morning largely to remind us of the setting and to set up the three verses I want to focus on. But there are a couple things I want to point out from the first two verses and hopefully shed some light on them.

First, you may remember that in Luke's account of Jesus, he says that Simon of Cyrene was pulled out of the crowd and made to carry Jesus' cross. The usual thing was for a criminal who was being crucified to carry their own cross, as John reports here. What probably happened here is that Jesus started out carrying his own cross, but became too weary to continue to do so, and so Simon was pulled out and made to carry it the rest of the way. Luke records that for us, and John doesn't.

The other thing I want to highlight is that: **John gives us no other information about the crucifixion itself other than to simply write, "There they crucified him."** In many ways, nothing more needed to be said. All the gospels are quite stark in their accounting of the actual crucifixion. In other documents, much has been written over the centuries about what happens to the body in crucifixion, the horrific, torturous nature of it, and more. But in the gospels, all that needs to be said is that he was crucified.

That brings us to verse 25 where we're told that gathered near the cross of Jesus are four women whom John highlights for us, and a fifth person – a male disciple – who gets mentioned in the next verse. Two of the women are named for us, while two aren't, though we know that Jesus' mother's name was Mary, and she had a sister named Salome, whom this may be here. The disciple isn't named either, but is identified as "the one whom Jesus loved" and is widely presumed to be the disciple John, who is the author of this Gospel Account. Now, the other gospels tell us that there were many others who witnessed the crucifixion, though they were gathered at more of a

distance. John makes it clear that these five were near Jesus.

This was bold and risky, to be so close to him. Being associated with someone who was deemed such a threat to society that they were crucified was not highly recommended in that day in age. And yet, here they are, taking that risk because of their compassionate love for Jesus.

Do we take that kind of risk for Christ in our lives? Theodore Roosevelt once said: **It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.**¹

These five people are there in the arena with Jesus marred by dust, sweat and blood, to use Roosevelt's words. And for those of us here this morning who are Christians this passage compels us to ask: Are we in the arena up close with Jesus Christ, or are we at a safe distance among the larger crowd anonymously observing, but not really participating?

Too many Christians, and therefore too many churches, don't get all the way into the game, and therefore have very little impact on the world around them. Churches will only step out in risk for Jesus as far as their people will follow Him. And many don't really get up close and personal with Jesus Christ. It's too risky. It asks too much. It's messy. It's hard work. We might go to church occasionally or even most every Sunday...but that isn't exactly resonating with Paul's words when he wrote, **"For me, to live is Christ"(Philippians 1:21)**. We like the resurrected Jesus that gives us eternal life, that gives us hope, that does something for us. We love being consumers of Christianity...but we're unsure about taking a risk and getting messy with

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, quoted at www.sermonillustrations.com.

Jesus on the cross and being identified as one of His disciples. We're unsure about getting involved in people's lives who need the love of Jesus shared with them, because their lives are messy, or their kids are messy, or they aren't like us. People are messy. You know what the difference is between people and a messy room? You can straighten up a messy room. I think inside we believe that and let it govern our responses to people. So we hesitate to get messy with people in their lives, and we play it safe and stay back away from Jesus, mixed in among the crowds, where we are less likely to hear his voice calling us into messiness.

We'll come back to this in a minute, so hold onto that thought.

Let's continue on with the last couple verses, which I want to read: **When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:26-27).**

So we see here Jesus, with a heart filled with compassion, taking care of these people even as they take the risk of being associated with him. In particular he focuses on his mother and the disciple. Some people have wondered over the years why Jesus didn't instead direct his mother's other sons, who were really his half brothers, to care for her. First of all, they didn't really believe in Jesus at this point. John 7:5 says, "Even his own brothers did not believe in him." Now, Acts 1:14 tells us that they did eventually believe, when we read, **"They (the disciples) all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14).** So the resurrection and the witness of the disciples clearly ended up impacting them, and they soon became believers. But as Jesus hung on the cross, they were on the sidelines of faith.

Second, and related to the first, the reason Jesus addressed the disciple and put him in charge of caring for Jesus' mother was probably because the brothers weren't there for Jesus to speak to. **Because of their lack of faith, they wouldn't have taken the risk that these other five people did to get up close and personal with Jesus.** They may have been further back, in the

crowd (you'd at least like to believe they would be); but not up close where Jesus, in his weak and broken state, could actually speak to them. So Jesus speaks to his mother and this disciple who was with her.

And in these words of Jesus' to his mother and this disciple, we see the compassion of Jesus, and the continual nature of Jesus to think of others besides himself. He reaches out through his words and cares for his mother, ensuring that someone who knew the love of Jesus in their heart would bring that kind of love and compassion into her life as she moved on without her first-born son.

I have tried at various times of my life to put myself in the shoes of Mary and what she would be thinking and feeling here. This just isn't what she expected. Sometimes in life, things don't turn out the way we thought they would. This happened recently to an expert on relations between North and South Korea when he was doing a live television interview with the BBC from his home office in South Korea. Things did not turn out as he expected in this interview that was being watched by people all over the world as it happened: **(Video Here. If you're reading online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh4f9AYRCZY>)**

That's a humorous unexpected ending. But many are not funny. Many are sad and painful. Like the pain that anyone goes through, we can never know exactly how someone is feeling in their own struggles, including Mary, here. Several of you can identify with her much more closely than I can because you've lost a child. Until becoming a pastor, I never realized how many parents in this world have had children die before them. **Losing a child is not something we talk about very much, or talk about very well, as a society.**

But as I've served as a pastor for nearly 15 years, I've learned that it's more common than I ever realized. In every church I've served, several parents have outlived one - or more - of their kids – whether it's because of a rare cancer or some other disease, birth complications, a car wreck, or some other kind of accident. It's true here at Rose Hill, too. I just learned this week of two more parents in our church who lost a child when he was in his 30's or so. So if you've experienced that, or if you've lost a spouse which is

probably next most difficult to process, know that you're not alone, even right here in this room, and there's a lot of compassion for you. There are a number of people who can identify very closely with you.

And from that place of identifying with someone's experience, even in a small or tangential way, we are really well equipped to extend compassion. It's what is happening here in this scene. First, some of his closest friends and family are gathered to be with him in his time of agony. This gets us back to the risk that they took to be with him. Why did they take that risk? Probably a multitude of factors, but compassion and letting him know he's not alone, is certainly a significant reason. We all know from personal experience that when people are going through trying, painful, emotional times, doing so with others is important. So they gather around him. They're just present with him. I love the fact that John doesn't record them as saying anything. They were just with him. Sometimes that's all we need to do to show compassion: to just be with people.

Henri Nouwen, one of the preeminent models of Christian compassion of the last 100 years, writes, **"Being with a friend in great pain is not easy. It makes us uncomfortable. We do not know what to do or what to say, and we worry about how to respond to what we hear. Our temptation is to say things that come more out of our own fear than out of our care for the person in pain. Sometimes we say things like "Well, you're doing a lot better than yesterday," or "You will soon be your old self again," or "I'm sure you will get over this." But often we know that what we're saying is not true, and our friends know it too.**

We do not have to play games with each other. We can simply say: "I am your friend, I am happy to be with you." We can say that in words or with touch or with loving silence. Sometimes it is good to say: "You don't have to talk. Just close your eyes. I am here with you, thinking of you, praying for you, loving you" (Henri Nouwen).ⁱ

These five are gathered at the foot of the cross don't say much. They're simply with Jesus – undoubtedly thinking of him, praying for him, and loving him. And then Jesus invites them into a relationship of compassion with his

words to them “here is your mother, here is your son.” And we see them embrace that compassion when we’re told that this disciple took Jesus’ mother into his home.

There wasn’t any law that compelled him to do this. He didn’t have to take her in. Jesus invites them to have compassion for one another, and the disciple takes it to the max. I know we all have limits and not all of us can take someone into our home in an act of compassion as he did, but: **Where is Jesus directing you to live with a greater degree of compassion toward someone?** Is it possible that Jesus is asking us to live with compassion toward someone, and carry it out in tangible ways like this disciple did, even when it’s inconvenient, or difficult, for us to do? You know the relationships you have, where compassion might bring some healing and some much needed companionship in the midst of a difficult situation. Or maybe you’re here this morning and you’re the one needing someone to be a compassionate listener...to just be present with you and maybe not even say anything except that they’re with you in the midst of whatever you’re facing. That’s a big part of our church. We do that through formal ministry structures like staff who have “ministry of compassion” as part of their job responsibilities, through our deacons, parish ministry, the small groups in the church, and all kinds of informal avenues through which people develop relationships of compassion. Extending compassion to people is something we all can do, as Jesus does here, and as these two do as well.

Let’s get close up to Jesus as these five did. It might be messy, it might be risky. But that’s the place where ministry of compassion happens, and lives change. Like we see here: Who in your life is Jesus directing you to minister to? Who in this church might you be able to reach out to? Who of your neighbors or co-workers or family members? Who needs some comfort? Who needs prayer? Who simply needs to know they’re not alone? Who just needs a listening ear? And if your first answer to those questions is, “me!” then let me know, or let Reverend Jannie know, or one of our deacons or your parish coordinator. Most importantly, let God know. Take it to Jesus, turn to his word, turn to him in prayer. Together as a church, let’s move closer to Jesus as these five people did. And let’s allow the compassion that Jesus invites them into with his words to them, and let’s allow the compassion that

they demonstrate, to inspire us to get into the messy ministry of compassion more deeply than we have before. Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ Henri J.M. Nouwen, Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith