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John 19:17-27
So That You May Believe: John
“Care From the Cross”

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At our denomination’s National Gathering back in early February, I went to a seminar by Rev. Dr. Mark Roberts titled, “Unlocking the Third Third Potential of Your Church.” It was about how to encourage people who are in the “third third” of life to be engaged in ministry and helping your church to flourish. You might wonder, “how do you define the third third of life?” There are probably a few ways to do it. We could take the average lifespan of a person in America and divide it into three equal segments. For instance, the average lifespan of a male American is almost exactly 75 years old. That divides nicely into three 25-year groups. The problem with that is that I just turned 50 a couple months ago and it puts me in the third third. So, clearly that’s not a good way to think about this. 😊

You could also look at life in stages. Retirement years – say, 65 and over – could be seen as the third third, perhaps. It’s less about a fixed, exact 1/3 number of years, and more about stages of life. That gets a little closer to how the third third seemed to be defined in this presentation. So, the third third might be only 10-15 years, or less than that, or it could be longer if you live to 101 like one of my grandfathers did. But it’s more about a season of life than an age; and maybe for each of us, that “third third” of life is a little different in duration, and might come at radically different ages depending on genetics, our health, or other factors.

Now, not all of us are in or even near this third third; Probably some of us hope we aren’t in the third third yet; others of you are there and in complete denial! Maybe we are in the third third and we don’t know it. But someday you’ll be there if you aren’t already, and Lord willing your third third will be a good season of life where you flourish for Jesus. So: What does that look like? What does it look like to flourish for Jesus and his Kingdom – his Church? Let’s turn to today’s passage and see if we get any answers. We are in John 19:17-27, continuing our journey through the Gospel According to John. We’re going to read up **through verse 24** initially, and then the last few verses in a couple minutes.

In these verses, and probably even starting a chapter earlier or so, Jesus has very quickly entered into the last third of his life. Jesus shows us that: **The last third of his life is not an equal numeric division of his life.** I would suggest that Jesus' life can easily be divided up into thirds, but they're nowhere near mathematical thirds given his 33 years of life. I would say the first third is his life up until he starts teaching and preaching publicly – about 30 years; The middle third is his three years of public ministry that comprise the majority of the ink on the pages of the gospels; and then the third third really is from John about 18 when he's arrested, or thereabouts. There is a shift in Jesus' life and he's suddenly into the third third of life, even if it is a stretch that only lasts a few hours of his 33 years on earth.

So, let's touch base a few things in what we just read so we understand what's going on here before we come back to this topic I've introduced. First, you notice that: **John records Jesus' crucifixion quite bluntly and succinctly.** Jesus carried his cross to a particular place called "The Skull" or in Aramaic it is "Golgotha". And here they crucified him, along with a couple others who were genuine criminals. Not much more needed to be said, as Roman crucifixion was not uncommon. People knew what it looked and sounded like. No detail needed to be communicated to the audience of his day.

We see: **In verse 19 Pilate has a sign put up that reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."** Of course, the chief priests protested that, pointing out that Jesus or others made that claim about him, but he wasn't *actually* considered their king by many Jews. That's why they wanted the Romans to crucify him on their behalf: They were offended by some of his claims, primarily his claim to equality with God, that he was sent by God, that he was God come to them in the flesh. They thought he was blasphemous, that he was a theological heretic. But Pilate replies that what he's written he's written. It's a done deal, and he's not going to change it.

The soldiers then essentially throw dice for his clothes. We get some detail about his clothes, particularly his undergarment that remains on him. It's noted that his undergarment was seamless, woven in one piece. It's an interesting detail, and while it might not mean much to us, to them it was a

piece of information that lets them know it was of good quality. It was one large piece of fabric made into this undergarment, rather than two or more smaller pieces stitched together.

John points us to Psalm 22:18 as a prophetic word fulfilled here. Psalm 22 was written by King David about 1,000 years earlier, and verse 18 reads, **“They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garments” (Psalm 22:18)**. We might not normally think of the Psalms as a prophetic portion of Scripture, and we might not think of David first and foremost as a prophet, but there is quite a bit of prophecy woven into the Psalms, including in some of the Psalms that he wrote. In fact, in Acts 2:30, Peter specifically and clearly calls David a prophet. So, at some level David was viewed that way in their day, even if that isn’t how we tend to think of him.

Let’s read the last few verses now – **John 19:25-27**. There are a handful of women John identifies who were gathered there around Jesus. Three of them are named Mary. As many of you have probably heard in other sermons the name “Miriam,” which is a Hebrew name we usually translate to “Mary,” (it stays “Miriam” in Greek) was exceedingly common at this time. As many as a quarter of women were named Mary.

They are undoubtedly there because of their grief, and because of a desire to be with Jesus in this moment to minister to him, so he’s not alone. It’s a gift that family or close friends give to someone as they near death, to simply be there with them. To remind them that they’re not alone. To show appreciation and love to the one who is nearing death. If you have a loved one who’s nearing death – be with them. It’s your ministry to them.

But then Jesus extends care from the cross as he is the one who ends up ministering to them – in particular his mother. He says to her and to this unnamed disciple – presumed to be John, who is also thought to be the writer of this gospel – **“Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple ‘Here is your mother’” (John 19:26-27a)**. The word to address his mother is “goonay” and it is not a cold, uncaring term. I can just imagine my kids walking into the kitchen as Gwen is cooking dinner, and the kids saying, “What’s for dinner, woman?” Oh my – that would not end well for them. But

in Jesus' day, that's not the case. It was perfectly acceptable and normal, and is a warm and respectful way of addressing her. I think we just don't have a good way to translate it.

And so, what Jesus does here is to make sure that his mother is cared for. **Even as he hangs on the cross, at the end of his life, he continues to minister to people and extend care to them that will carry on beyond even his own earthly death.** We might wonder where Joseph, Jesus' earthly father is and why he isn't around to care for her. The fact is, we don't really know. Scripture is silent about Joseph after the incident where Jesus is left by his parents in Jerusalem when he was 12 years old, and they had to go back and get him.

So, Jesus appoints this disciple as Jesus' replacement, to care for Mary in Jesus' absence. You know, we Christians talk about being Christ-like as Jesus' followers, about being his hands and feet in the world...and here we see: **Jesus literally gives the job of "being Jesus" to this disciple, asking him to fill in for Jesus, to be his substitute.** This job of caring for her, that Jesus normally would have had as Mary's firstborn son, is being giving to this disciple.

It's an incredibly powerful moment, and in it we see that Jesus is discipling people and caring for them literally up until his last moments on earth. Jesus is not deterred by being at the end of his life, and in the process of an incredibly painful death. This isn't a situation of entering into, or being part way through, the last third with good health. He's on death's doorstep, and here he is, making sure that others are cared for and loved as if he were there himself. We see the fruit of his ministry from the cross with the concluding words of verse 27: "From that time on, the disciple took her into his home" (John 19:27). Jesus' ministry is carried out by this disciple after Jesus dies.

I think Jesus' ministry from the cross is incredibly powerful, and incredibly inspirational. **There's no reason we can't flourish for Christ and his Kingdom and be ministering to others in our third third of life as well.** Especially if we are in a place of good health. If the third third of your life is still several years or even decades away for you – at least, as far as you know

– there’s no reason you can’t start thinking now about how you’re going to set yourself up to minister to others when the day comes and you’re in that place. And I’m not saying that we *start* ministering to others in the last third of life; I’m saying that we *don’t want it to end* in that season of life. Jesus’ third third was an extension of what he did in the middle third. We want to be ministering now in whatever season we are in, and for that to continue in the third third of life. So, if you’re not in that third third, you can start mentally preparing yourself, and praying about it, and flourishing for Jesus now, so that when the day comes and you’re in that last third of life, that you will see it as a ministry opportunity and not just riding off into the sunset on a golf cart or a sailboat or a chairlift or however we might envision our retirement years. There is so much more that Jesus can do with us in those latter years.

And: If you’re in that third third now, let Jesus’ example inspire you to minister to others and to be a blessing to others; To see ministry as your “job” in retirement. I’m not saying it has to be full time, or that you can’t enjoy the freedom that retirement affords you. But just because you’re in the third third of life, that does not mean God can’t work through you to bless others. You are in a unique place, in fact, to give your blessing and support and encouragement to the generations behind you. You can be an example of ministering to others and living out your faith, wherever you are.

I want to close this morning’s message with a story of another Miriam. We read of three “Miriams” in this morning’s passage, translated Mary, but I want to tell you briefly about one more Miriam: Our own Miriam Gesell. A couple months ago I asked for you all to share with me your stories of relationships where God has given you opportunities to minister to people, or simply get to know them – particularly with people who don’t know Jesus. Two of you have responded – so consider this a reminder and a refresher of that request. Miriam gave me a hand-written autobiography of her journey of faith. And the note she attached to the 3 ½ pages said, “Here is my story. You can do with it what you want.” In spite of her open-ended invitation to use it as I wanted, I called her this week to make sure she was ok with what I wanted to do. So, here is a small part of Miriam’s story, with her blessing in sharing this:

“When my husband developed Parkinson’s Disease we had to move to a retirement community. His passing into eternal life left a huge void in my life. There had been a Bible study where we live, but the leader left. Another resident and I expressed a desire to get it going again. We agreed to be a part of restarting it. She didn’t want to be the speaker, and because I had experience leading a small group Bible study, I became the speaking leader. She is a supportive contributor. We use a study guide.

The beautiful thing is – she is Catholic and I am Protestant; yet we have a wonderful fellowship together. We have the same God and the same Bible. But now I am 89 years old, going on 90. I have wondered if this is what I’m supposed to be doing? I have received confirmation that, yes I can still serve my Lord and Savior in my old age. And so can we all – no matter our age. JUST PRAY – and PRAISE GOD. Amen.”

I don’t think Miriam would be offended (she said herself she’s “in my old age”) if I said she’s certainly in her third third of life. ☺ She has credibility about this stage of life that I just don’t have. And here she is leading a Bible study in her retirement home (served as a deacon not that long ago, too), helping to shape disciples of Jesus, and bringing people into a deeper place of faith. She’s been doing this for three years or so, and every time she and I talk about what she’s doing there, I’m impressed and I’m inspired.

And I hope you might be as well. **God has given you gifts and abilities so he can work through you, to bless and encourage others, and move people toward Jesus, regardless of your stage of life.** He’s calling you to “be Jesus” to others, just as he did to this disciple in our text today; he literally asks this guy to do Jesus’ job. He’s still asking us to minister to others on his behalf. You might be a teenager or a college student, you could be in your 30’s or 40’s and pressing hard into your career; you can be single, married, have a houseful of kids, or a four-legged furry friend; you can be recently retired or well into your golden years.

No matter where you are in life, God can work through you to help move other people toward Jesus; to carry on the ministry that Jesus did when he walked the earth. And there are so many at this church who do that as well,

including in their third third of life...I could have reached out to any number of people besides Miriam and asked if they could be examples. For those of you in that place: Keep it up. Keep setting that example of living well – not as the world defines it, but as Jesus does even here on the cross – living well in the third third of life. Keep flourishing for Jesus; keep encouraging the next generations to follow Jesus; Keep showing us what it means to minister to others in the name of Jesus; Keep showing what it means to pass on the faith to others. Give us that example, even as we look to Jesus as an example, as he ministers to others in his last hours. As Miriam says, we can still serve our Lord and Savior, and we can do so at any age. Let's pray...Amen.