

**FINAL WORDS FROM THE CROSS:  
“HERE IS YOUR SON . . . HERE IS YOUR MOTHER”**

**John 19:23-27**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

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This past week I've thought about some of the people who have served as my role models – people whose example I've tried to follow in my life and ministry. My primary role model as a preacher was a great man named John Claypool, one of my pastors during seminary. John's sermons were always meticulously prepared, crafted with the care of a skilled artist. His sermons combined intellectual depth with emotional power in a way I have rarely heard from the pulpit. My primary role model as a teacher was a Church History professor named Glenn Hinson. Dr. Hinson always outlined his lectures so that his train of thought was easy to follow. When I taught at the college level, I followed suit by providing my classes with outlines of my lectures. I'm happy to report that my primary role model as a father was my own dad, Johnny Thomason. Daddy always had standards and expectations for his three sons, but whenever we failed to meet those standards, he always responded to us with unconditional love. I've tried to provide the same response to my two daughters and now to my grandson.

I'm sure you've had significant role models of your own – people you looked up to at an early age and who influenced the way you approached your life and work. The reason I've been thinking about role models this week is that today's Gospel text is chock full of them. The setting, of course, is Jesus' crucifixion. John reports that four of his closest companions stand at the foot of the cross – his mother Mary; her sister Mary, the wife of Clopas; Mary Magdalene; and a fourth figure referred to as “the disciple whom [Jesus] loved,” probably John himself.

In this scene, Jesus is a role model for selfless compassion. Even as he hangs on the cross dying in pain, his mind is lifted above himself, serene and calm enough to think, and pray, and plan, for others. First, a prayer for his tormentors: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Second, a promise to the dying thief: “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” And third, a last will and testament to his mother and closest disciple: “Woman, here is your son! Son, here is your mother!” Even when he is dying to save a lost world, even when he is enduring the most painful death imaginable, he remembers the one who gave him birth and nurture and makes provision for her future. He asks John to care for his mother and asks his mother to accept John's protection and care. Jesus shows us what it means to obey the fifth commandment, to “honor” our mothers and fathers, to ensure that their needs are met when they grow old and vulnerable. Jesus is our role model for selfless compassion.

Now notice the three women standing in the midst of the hostile crowd. They are role models of love and loyalty to Jesus. All but one of the male disciples are absent from the scene, hiding in the shadows, fearing for their own lives. But these three women do not shrink from Jesus' darkest hour. They show up to witness his execution; they remain steadfast while others falter in their faith; they are with Jesus until the bitter end. The Gospels picture women as playing a prominent role in Jesus' ministry. In an age when women are nothing more than the property of men, Jesus welcomes women as his followers and values their gifts. He regularly shows

compassion, mercy, and love toward women. And they respond by remaining faithful to their Master when he is up against it. These women are role models of love and loyalty to Jesus.

And then there is John, the only disciple among the twelve who dares to come near the cross. He is pictured as standing beside Jesus' mother, Mary, ready to assume the responsibility of caring for her as a son would care for his own mother. Notice what is going on here: in the person of John, blood relations are transcended; new family ties are formed; the Church is being constituted as Jesus envisions it. Jesus wants John to know, and wants us to know, that as his disciples, we are responsible to care for one another, even taking on the role of parent or child or sister or brother to another who needs us. This is what it means to be the Church.

In his book, *Final Words from the Cross*, Adam Hamilton tells the story of a man named Roger, an elementary school teacher in Manhattan, Kansas. One night many years ago, Roger was working late. As he was leaving the school building long after dark, he noticed one of his students, a boy named Johnathon, swinging on the playground by himself. He asked the fourth-grader why he was at the playground so late on a school night. He learned that this little boy's mother had left the family and that his father worked all night and struggled to care for him. Roger showed compassion and reassured Johnathon that things would be okay; then he sent the boy home.

From this point on, Roger took a special interest in Johnathon and began to look for ways to help him. Within the year Johnathon was placed in a foster home because his father was unable to care for him. He eventually returned to his father's home, but once more his father was unable to provide the attention he needed. Knowing Johnathon would be sent back to a foster home, his father asked the elementary school teacher if he would take Johnathon into his home. Roger agreed and welcomed this child as if he were his own son. His role in nurturing, mentoring, and shaping Johnathon's life gave Johnathon a radically different future than he might have had.

Johnathon was a gifted child who grew up to be a remarkable man. With the help of Roger, he went to Kansas State University. He traveled across the country and to different parts of the world. He fell in love with a beautiful young woman and married her, and together they went to serve the poor in South Africa before returning to Chicago, where he began working with inner-city boys who had no place to call home.

There is a punch line to this story that makes it especially significant to Adam Hamilton. The woman Johnathon is married to is Hamilton's daughter, Danielle. Hamilton says that from the day Danielle was born, he began to pray for the unknown boy who one day would be Danielle's husband. Little did he know he was praying for a little boy whose troubled life would find stability and joy and a future with hope because of the love of a schoolteacher, one whose faith compelled him to see this child as his own. Hamilton writes, "How grateful I am that Roger had heard the words spoken from the cross, 'Behold your son.'"

The New Testament uses a number of images to describe the identity and mission of the Church – the body of Christ, the new Israel, the household of God, the communion of the saints, and so on. My favorite image for the Church is suggested by Jesus' third word from the cross. The Church is an extended family. In Jesus Christ, blood ties are transcended; strangers become friends; and friends become relatives. Followers of Jesus intentionally develop caring relationships with others who are older or younger than they are.

I have seen this happen in my own family. While my father was still practicing his trade as a commercial realtor, he befriended a man my age by the name of Bill Ferguson. Bill was struggling to make it in the real estate business, and my dad mentored him and provided him with clients. Daddy was a role model to Bill not only in his professional life, but also in the life of faith. Bill and his wife Jan became members of my parents' church. Under my dad's influence, Bill went from being a nominal church member to being a serious disciple of Jesus Christ and a deacon in their church. When Daddy died thirteen years ago, Bill delivered one of the eulogies at his funeral. In the years that followed, Bill spent countless hours helping my mother manage the rental property she owned, accepting no compensation in return.

After Daddy's death, my mother was living alone and was separated geographically from her two sons. Bill and Jan proceeded to adopt my mother as their mother. They started inviting her into their home for dinner and taking her to plays and concerts. They called her frequently on the phone and dropped by for spontaneous visits. They reached out to her when she felt lost and isolated. They provided her with a new home when her own home felt large, lonely, and empty. Bill and Jan heard the third word from the cross, "Here is your mother," and accepted Jesus' challenge.

One of the things that makes the Woodbury United Methodist Church distinctive is that we are truly intergenerational. Unlike many congregations today that are completely grey-haired, we are blessed with a healthy mix of age groups ranging from elementary school children to senior adults. Even better, the young and the old don't just stare at each other across the abyss of their age differences; they have contact with one another and genuinely care for one another.

When I envision our church in my mind's eye, I see an extended family that worships and works and plays together, where the young honor the old and the old value the young. I think about our children and youth singing Christmas carols to our church matriarch, Florence Brown, after she had turned 100 years of age. I think about a girl in her early teens, Julia Bower Richardson, teaming up with an octogenarian, Manny Gesh, to lead our Operation Christmas Child ministry. I think about our beloved Dorothy Morosco, at age 88, serving as a hall monitor for our children's Sunday School less than two weeks before she died of cancer. I think about myself, a man in his early 70's, walking into Fellowship Hall after worship and getting a bear hug from a teenage boy, Sam Temple. I recall scenes like this with a bit of wistfulness because they have become rare during the pandemic. But these scenes remind us of who we are and how we operate as a congregation; they remind us of what we have to look forward to when we are reunited as a church family, and how we are called to connect with one another in the meantime.

I wonder this morning, is there someone in your life to whom you can be a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, or sister? Is there someone to whom you can be a role model, mentor, helper, or companion? Friends, the Church is not just a collection of names on a membership roll. The Church is an extended family. Jesus is saying to each of us, young and old alike, "Here is your child or grandchild . . . here is your parent or grandparent." May we, like Mary and John, embrace our roles with gladness and gratitude.