

JEWS AND CHRISTIANS
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Second Sunday in Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Today I will share my reflections on one of “The Seven Last Words of Christ” from the cross. Perhaps you know them: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Today you will be with me in paradise. Mother behold you son; son behold your mother. I thirst. Why have you forsaken me? It is finished. Into your hands I commend my spirit.*

For the traditional three hour community Good Friday service held at St. Agnes Catholic Church this year, I was assigned the Third Word. *Women behold your son; son, behold your mother.*

Although I am departing from the gospel lesson for this Second Sunday of Easter (John 20:19-31), it is not far off. Jesus said, *Peace be with. The sins that you forgive are forgiven.* The Psalm for today (Psalm 133) is also relevant. *Behold how pleasant and good it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.*

The Third Word from the Cross:

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 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***

Jesus couldn’t move his hands. He could barely move his head but he could move his eyes. He looked at his mother then toward his disciple and said, *‘Woman, here is your son.’* And then looking back toward his mother, *‘Here is your mother.’* And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

That disciple took the mother of Jesus home, beat her up and pushed her out into the cold, dark night where she and her children were bound, gagged, and dragged away to ghettos and gas chambers.

I know, I know. It doesn’t say that in the gospel pages. But that’s what happened. Not to Mary herself but to her people.

Beat up and pushed out into the cold, dark night. Bound, gagged, and dragged away to ghettos and gas chambers.

In this gospel of great symbolisms, Mary, we might say, represents “Judaism”; and the beloved disciple, we might say, represents the fledgling community that arose in the wake of Jesus death and eventually became known as “the church.”

It will do us good on any day, but especially on Good Fridays to remember how Christians turned Jews into scapegoats and crucified them in more ways than one, in more places than one, in more centuries than one.

Jesus said to his mother, *‘Woman, here is your son.’* And to his disciple, *‘Here is your mother.’* With his dying breath Jesus was trying to create a new kind of community, formed by love and not by family or tribal blood.

Judaism gave birth to Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus. And Jesus gave birth to a new community, to a new way of being and living in this world, a way that bridges tribal divisions of one kind and another. It's the right way but it's not an easy way.

It's hard to be true and faithful in this world. So much can go wrong in the best of persons and communities. Much has gone wrong in the church. Without God's grace and forgiveness none of us stands a chance.

It will do us good to remember how Christians turned Jews into scapegoats and crucified them in more ways than one. It will do us good to remember and to repent. Now as bad as the news is there is also good news: there is more grace in God than sin in us.

On what would eventually be called Good Friday, while he bled on the cross, Jesus said: *'Woman, here is your son.'* And to his disciple, *'Here is your mother.'*

But Christians would turn Good Friday into a rally day and terrorize the Jewish people for 2000 years. It's not what Jesus had in mind. He didn't have another religion in mind, least of all one that would become sectarian, exclusive, and bellicose. That's not what Jesus held in his heart.

You can hear the heart of Jesus in this gospel. For God so loved the world. God so loved the world. Not the Jewish world or the Christian world or the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Hindu world or the Sikh, Jain or Bahai worlds, or the humanist, animist or atheists worlds. God so loved the world. Period.

Jesus never meant for his way to become a way of exclusion. I am the way, the truth and the life meant *love* is the way. He didn't mean Christianity was the way to heaven and all other religions were not. He didn't mean he was the way to another place at all. He meant love is the way to live here and now.

Those who abide in love abide in God, he said. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. I am in you and you are in me. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. Come and see where I abide, he said. In my father's house are many mansions, many rooms, many dwelling places, not just one. In other words, there are so many ways to dwell in God, which is to say to dwell in love.

It will do us good to remember how Christians turned against Jews, the very people of our Lord's mother.

It's hard to believe but it's true: only in the past 50 years or so has the church begun to acknowledge and appreciate a simple fact: Jesus was not a Christian. Jesus was Jewish, a child of a Jewish mother and father, who themselves were children of Abraham and Sarah who long, long ago found and nursed a promise in their hearts, a promise that someday their children and their children's children would find a way to bless all the families, tribes and nations of the whole earth—a way of love, not a way of hate, a way of mercy not a way of torture, a way of forgiveness not a way of revenge, a way of inclusion not a way of exclusion.

Jesus didn't invent that promise. He nursed and cultivated that promise in his heart. It's an ancient, precious and fragile promise blessed, broken open, and given each time we gather round the Table of our Lord and share his body and his blood. By this will all people know you are my disciples if you love one another. There is no other way.

Here is one verse from the traditional "Solemn Reproaches of the Cross" often read in churches on Good Friday.

O my people, O my church,
What have I done to you,
or in what have I offended you?

Answer me.

I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel,
and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder.
I made you joint heirs with them of my covenants
but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.
Lord, have mercy.

And God is Merciful. This is a good day to remember that God is merciful. And if God is, shall we not also be.