

“The Art of Jesus: Behold Your Mother”

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Dr. R. Scott Colglazier
Senior Minister

First Congregational Church
Los Angeles, CA

It's one of the most touching moments in the life of Jesus. Just a couple of lines of dialogue, and yet it resonates throughout the history of the Church. So beautiful. So human. Jesus is on the cross. You can only imagine his suffering. His pain. His anguish. But even on the cross he has the awareness to look down and see his beloved friends.

There is Mary Magdalene, and she is significant because, as legend has it, she was so broken and fractured in life that she had seven demons inside her, but in the presence of divine love, those demons were tamed and she became a whole person again. Please, don't literalize the symbolism of demon possession; this is a woman touched, transformed, and renewed by the unconditional love and infinite grace found in the person of Jesus.

We have a marvelous depiction of Mary Magdalene in our Shatto Chapel by Ricardo Rodriguez, and the demons surrounding Mary look like little cherubic angels, and as much as any painting in our church, it portrays the possibility that goes to the heart of our faith, namely, that no matter how low we get, no matter how broken we become, no matter how confused and overwhelmed we might feel, divine love brings us back to life.

But in addition to Mary Magdalene, there is also mention of Mary the mother of Jesus. Imagine this . . . Jesus is betrayed, he is humiliated, he is nailed to a wooden cross, and in addition to the restless crowd of Roman soldiers and the typical gawkers on the outskirts of Rome, the mother of Jesus is watching all of this. His mother sees his crucifixion. No one suffers like a mother. The bond. The beauty. The connection. This man came from her body. She nursed and bathed him as a baby. She watched him learn to read and experience the rituals of his faith. She saw him apprentice as a carpenter. Yet all along she knew he was heading toward some reckoning. Imagine how she suffered watching him suffer.

And then that tender moment happens. Jesus looks down from the cross. He sees his mother. He sees his favorite disciple, John, the writer of the Gospel of John, sometimes called the beloved disciple. And he says to his mother, “My dear woman, behold your son.” And to John he says, “And now behold your mother.” There is an exchange happening here. It is love and responsibility mingling together. It's the kind of love that takes care of the other. It's like a father saying to a son, “Please take care of your mom.” It's like a mom saying to a daughter, “Please look after your dad. I don't have much longer.” It's so tender.

Think for a moment about this painting by Fra Angelico. There's so much happening in the painting. In the upper part of the painting you see the angels attending to Jesus.

The Roman soldiers are at the foot of the cross. Some are looking up at the dying Jesus. Dumfounded. Puzzled. Still others are looking away, almost indifferent to his suffering. And yet others look at their fellow soldiers, as if to ask, "How do you feel about this? I don't know how I should feel. How do you feel?"

But at the bottom of the painting a woman has fainted. The suffering has become too much. The violence too overwhelming. And that woman is Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus. She has stood beside him. She has followed him. Helpless in one way, but utterly strong in another. But you can only be strong for so long. There is blood gushing from his pierced side. And she knows it's over. He's dead. And so she can no longer hold it together. And she faints. She faints and falls to the ground and is helped by friends.

Mary is the face of love. Not just a mother's love, but the face of a mothering God. That God loves like a mother. That God aches like a mother. That God suffers like a mother. That's what we see here. In fact, I would suggest that every time there is a crucifixion in the world God aches with vulnerability.

God cannot make you do anything. I know we sometimes think that God can make people do anything, but I don't think God can make you do anything. God can encourage you. God can inspire you. God can love you, nudge you, pull you, invite you, lure you, beckon you, but God cannot make you treat your neighbor with respect, and God cannot stop you from saying a racist, sexist remark, and God cannot stop you from abusing drugs or alcohol, and God cannot stop you from making a terrible decision with your personal life.

God's power is the power of love. Our power is the power of response. And so every time we move toward our own destruction as a human being or we cause pain to others, God aches for us and God suffers with us and God longs for us to do better. It's love. You can't have love without vulnerability, and that's what we see in the fainting of Mary. It's love that is strong enough to be vulnerable. In fact, vulnerability is the essence of the spiritual

I was reminded of that last weekend. A little story. Some of you have met my daughter Katie. She goes by Kathryn now, but she will always be my Katie. Katie has accepted a new job in New York City. This is a big thing for her. She is going to work in the area of program development for the YMCA of Greater New York City. It's a big job. And if you don't mind me saying, I am so proud of her.

But Katie has two dogs, both Labrador retrievers, and let's face it, you can't really move to New York with two Labrador retrievers. And so she called and asked if I would be willing to take one of her dogs – Daisy. (By the way, as soon as she got the job, I knew that phone call was coming my way) And it makes sense, because my dog, Gracie, and her dog, Daisy, are from the same litter and we got them together as puppies nine years ago. Last week she drove one thousand, eight hundred miles in two days to bring Daisy to me. Daisy and Gracie had not seen one another in nine years. I think it's a

Lifetime Original movie! The dogs are doing fine, and their theme song has become the liturgical classic by Peaches and Herb -- Reunited (And it Feels So Good).

Everything was great last weekend until she loaded up the car to head back to the Midwest and then onto New York City. She started crying on Saturday morning trying to say goodbye to Daisy. And then the crying turned into sobbing. And then I started to cry. That sweet dog had seen her through thick and thin, from city to city as she built her career, and through more break-ups with men than Planters has peanuts!

I know it might seem like an oversimplification but it's true – she was crying, because she was vulnerable enough to love – a dog – yes – a dog – but love is love. And I was crying because I was vulnerable enough to love her. And Mary fainted at the foot of the cross, because you can't love unless you're willing to become vulnerable enough to suffer. That's how it works.

I wonder how many tears God has shed for you? For me? Tears of anguish hoping we would do the right thing, the good thing, the honest thing. I wonder how many times God has shed tears over our indifference to the important things in life and our obsession over the unimportant things. I wonder how many tears God has shed when we've allowed ourselves to be eaten away by judgment or bigotry or prejudice. I wonder how many times God has wanted to shed tears over our propensity to cruelty, and if not cruelty then gossipy tackiness, and we think it doesn't hurt anyone, but it does hurt someone, because it goes around and around until it lands inside a human heart.

The face of Mary is the face of God, and God suffers so much because God loves so much. And I wonder about God's tears for America right now. We've seen over the past weeks escalating assaults against Jewish community centers around the country. Why is that happening? Well, anti-Semitism is nothing new, and what every Jewish person knows is that there are those who wish nothing less than the elimination of the Jews from the face of the earth. The Jewish people live with that every day.

But I wonder if something else isn't going on. I wonder if the escalation of demonizing others, featured again and again in our political climate, I wonder if it isn't giving permission – permission – to become more brazen in our attacks against Jews. Once bullying becomes an acceptable way of being in the world, where does it end? Where does it stop?

I look at this painting and I see Mary the mother of Jesus, the Mother of God, and she is fainting, overcome, overwhelmed, over-wrought at the violence of the world. She suffers because she loves. And God suffers because God loves too. But I see something else. I see her friends catching her. Holding her. Comforting her. Yes, in the moment she is overcome. What mother wouldn't be? But in the midst of her suffering, love reaches out to help.

I was at the hospital this week visiting two families . . . one couple trying to make sure their twin babies make it to their first month birthday. The twin boys weigh less than

three pounds each. I reached my hand through the incubator / cubicle and touched those little bodies and blessed those twin boys. The parents are suffering right now because they love.

In another room at that same hospital, grown twin daughters are comforting their father in what will probably be his last weeks upon the earth. They were suffering because they love. Yet in both cases the suffering was not paralyzing. They were all doing everything they could do to bring love and comfort and hope to the situation. And that's what I see at the bottom of this painting. Mary is in anguish. And she faints. Of course she does! But her friends catch her and hold her and help her.

Many years ago someone sent me a postcard from Rome that said in a comical kind of way: "Some days we're the pigeon and some days we're the statue." Fair enough. I would put it like this – some days we cry (because we love) and some days we wipe away the tears of others (again, because we love). God is found in all of it. When we hurt, God is there. And when we help, God is there. That's what I see in this painting. That's what I see in Jesus and his mother. And so if you need to cry because you love this week, then cry. But if you can, find a way to wipe away the tears of another too. Make the world better for someone else. Because just as we can bring God pain, we can bring God joy.

Friends, it's a marvelous painting. It's a marvelous reading. Let's honor it this second week of Lent. I love you all. Let's love one another. Amen.