

Seventh Station of the Cross: "Jesus Speaks to the Women"

Luke 23:27-31

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Well Jesus is now on the Via Dolorosa--the "Way of Sorrow"--en route to Golgotha--"the Place of the Skull"--where he will soon be executed. Behind him is Simon the Cyrene, a Black Jew who had been pressed into service to help carry Christ's cross. Together, they wend their way down the street under the force of the soldier's whip. A great multitude lines the street to witness this spectacle while cries of "Crucify him! Crucify Him!" ring out from their midst.

But also in attendance are a group of women who have not hatred but rather PITY for him. Interestingly, in contrast to the religious or political leaders, to the soldiers and even to his own disciples, all of whom were MALE, there is no record of any WOMAN deserting Jesus, or persecuting him, or ill-treating him. While not a single disciple of his had so much as dared come forward to help in the hour of his greatest need, it was the WOMEN who followed and wept and accompanied him every step to that cross. And these were not women of high standing but COMMON people; these were simple, hard working women who over the past couple of years had heard of this Jesus or perhaps had even witnessed his ministry first-hand. They had witnessed his compassion for the sick, the lonely, or for the powerless. They had seen him welcome both women and children into his ranks and heard him repeatedly teach about the centrality of love in the kingdom of God. They KNEW he was not the criminal that his enemies had made him out to be. And so their tears and lamentations are real, springing from out the very depths of their heart.

But at one point along his trek, Jesus stops for one brief moment. He doesn't bless them or thank them for their friendly sympathy. Rather, he urges them NOT to weep for HIM but for THEMSELVES and for their CHILDREN. He doesn't disapprove of their mourning for him--no doubt he appreciated it. But because he knows what terrible judgments yet await Jerusalem, he becomes the one here who is showing pity on THEM. He knows that it would only be a matter of time before the armies of Rome would be arrayed against them and her walls would be battered down and her Temple destroyed so that no two stones would stand atop another. Their husbands and children would be killed and the rest carried away to a foreign land. The reality is, and it is one we continue to see TODAY, that when war desolates a land and the soil is stained with blood, that the sharp sword turns its SHARPEST edge upon the women as they bereave the loss of their husbands and children. In the year 70 A.D., this did in fact become a reality.

What I'd like to point out in this scene of Jesus' encounter with these women is how there is often no greater hindrance to one's faith than one's feelings. That part of us that "emotes," that "feels" is STRONGER and MORE CONTROLLING than our minds and rational faculties. This became especially apparent to me some years ago when I went through a two-

year pastoral counseling program while ministering in Syracuse, NY. We were instructed week-after-week to listen and respond to how people FEEL rather than how they think or what they say because that was a greater indicator of where they were REALLY at. This is because too often we use words or rational justifications to HIDE how we really feel than to express them.

Several presbyteries back, our then Executive Presbyter invited all pastors to join in an all-day discussion on church leadership. To prepare for it, we had to buy and read *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* by John Kotter, a world-renowned expert on leadership who teaches at the Harvard Business School. This is the opening sentence of the book: “The single most important message in this book is very simple. People change what they do LESS because they are given *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* THAN BECAUSE they are *shown* a truth that influences their *FEELINGS*.” In other words, people begin to change their behavior when they are forced to “FEEL” differently and not “THINK” differently.

The most important insight I ever derived from my years of studying “social ethics”—the field my doctorate is in and a subject I used to teach at the local college—is that the majority of ethical decisions we make in life are NOT made because we find them to be more RATIONALLY COMPELLING than any of the others, that is, because we’re convinced a certain course of action is wiser or more beneficial than another. The reality is that none of us ever sits down before some ledger book and lists all the “pros” on one side and all the “cons” on the other and then chooses the one that makes the most sense to us. Rather, it is because deep down within each of us, we INSTINCTIVELY FEEL that such-and-such is the right decision we have to make. In other words, our EMOTIONS—how we feel deep down in our gut—becomes the single most important determinant of WHY we do WHAT we do and NOT whether the decision seems reasonable or not.

The PROBLEM with making decisions this way is that as powerful as our feelings may be, if we are constantly guided by THEM instead of something much more STABLE, we will invariably find ourselves in trouble. Take for example the crowd who called for Christ’s execution. At the beginning of the week, they were praising him, yelling “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” as he led a parade of his followers into Jerusalem on the back of a small donkey. However, by the END of the week, these SAME persons were screaming, “Kill him! Kill him!” They were so easily manipulated by the religious leaders because they followed their EMOTIONS rather than something much more PERMANENT AND UNWAVERING.

I think we can ALL attest from personal experience just how unreliable our feelings can be, that they are inherently unstable- they come and go depending upon the circumstance. We can so easily be up one minute and then down the next. Good and happy feelings may result from outward circumstances such as achieving success in life, enjoying the warmth of true friendship, experiencing a beautiful scene, having a loving home environment, and advancing in

your career. However, we ALSO know that life is full of unexpected twists and turns, and just as fortune may smile on us one minute, tragedy and heartbreak can suddenly strike us the next—just ask the half a million families who suddenly and unexpectedly lost a husband, a wife; a son or a daughter as a result of this pandemic. The reality is that our feelings are NOT AND NEVER CAN BE a reliable foundation upon which to base our decisions.

Let me give you an example from out of my OWN life. By the time I graduated high school and started college—exactly fifty years ago this year--I had already rejected my Christian upbringing in the local Presbyterian church and declared myself an atheist. However, several years later, I was at a church service I didn't want to be at but went solely as a favor to my aunt who I happened to be visiting at the time. I thought the service was dreadful and yet as bad as it was, when the it mercifully concluded, I found myself experiencing a spiritual crisis that could only have been precipitated by the Holy Spirit. Thinking about my life and the downward trajectory it had taken for the past couple of years- the people I had begun surrounding myself with, my lack of focus as to future goals, those persons whom I loved but continued to hurt again and again, I realized in that moment just how shallow and empty everything suddenly seemed to become for me. Without even thinking about what I was doing, I got down on my knees right there in that pew and uttered perhaps the first real prayer I had ever mouthed, "God, I don't even think you're real but if there IS something out there, please help me."

Now notice the simplicity of that prayer- there was no expression of repentance such as asking God to forgive me my sins- just a deep, heart-felt cry for help. However, that's all it TOOK for the moment I got up off my knees, I KNEW THAT I KNEW THAT I KNEW that something had happened and that my life was never again going to be the same. It was a Damascus road experience similar to what St. Paul had when he suddenly found himself transformed from a zealous Pharisee intent on throwing Christians into prison to becoming the greatest evangelist the Church has ever known. By the end of that week, I was convinced that I wasn't going back to Rutgers University where I was getting ready for my Junior year but instead preparing to become a minister of the gospel WHEREVER and HOWEVER that would be made possible.

In the days following what I call my "conversion" experience, I began the process of trying to understand what had happened that Sunday night and what being a Christian actually meant. One piece of scripture seemed to stand out in particular- it was Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal and the joy the father experiences when his wayward son returns home, safe and sound. When the younger son discovers how much his father loves him and that he has been unconditionally received and welcomed back home, he is suddenly transformed into a new person. He now realizes that he was born a son and NOTHING would ever alter that relationship. As the father explains to the cold and unsympathetic OLDER brother, "My son had been dead but now he lives; he was lost, but now was found."

Well that described my OWN experience perfectly- I had been lost but now was found and welcomed home by a Father God who loved me with an everlasting love; one who refused to

give up on me even when I had all but given up on MYSELF. I had discovered that there actually WAS someone or something out there who had claimed me that night, someone who said to me, “David, you are now MINE and nothing—NO NOTHING!—will ever separate you from either my presence or my love.” Subsequently, I experienced a feeling unlike any I had ever felt before- it was a feeling of pure joy, a sense of elation that filled me from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes. For the first time, I felt I had received the opportunity for a new beginning in life; the chance to start all over again with a fresh, clean slate.

The emotional high from that realization lasted for several days, but then something happened on the fourth day that left me quite troubled. I woke up to find there was no longer any sense of elation, no heightened emotion, no profound feeling of joy. I thought I was going to experience that high the rest of my life but instead, my mind and heart returned to the state it was in BEFORE I entered the church that night- somewhat lonely, guilty and depressed. I began to question what had occurred several days earlier, whether I had merely IMAGINED something which HADN'T taken place or WORSE, that there really was no God AFTER ALL. That was when my aunt gave me a book to read written by a Chinese Christian named Watchman Nee; it was entitled *The Normal Christian Life*. In the very first chapter, he describes a phenomenon which occurs to many Christians- not ALL but certainly many. He said that immediately following one's conversion to Christ, the experience is so heady that he or she feels a sudden flood of ecstasy fill his or her entire being. Awakened to the realization that we are children of God, brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that was an eternal relationship no one can ever sever or alter, there is engendered deep within us a profound sense of peace and security unlike any we've ever experienced before. Watchman Nee said God does this INTENTIONALLY because God wants us to truly know that the experience of discovering light after years of walking in darkness is indeed a REAL PHENOMENON and can't be denied.

However, within a few days, God then REMOVES that sensation because it is God's way of saying, “All right, I demonstrated to you that I am INDEED real and that the experience you had was ALSO genuine. But you cannot live on feelings ALONE- you will have to learn to live by FAITH, by trusting in my love and presence EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL it, even in those times when you find yourself lonely and depressed and overwrought from guilt and sorrow.” That is how we MATURE as Christians- as we learn to trust in God's promise and presence REGARDLESS of whatever circumstance or situation we may happen to find ourselves in. TRUE faith is learning to walk throughout life, relying NOT on the basis of one's emotional disposition but ON THE PROMISE OF SCRIPTURE AND THE WORDS OF CHRIST, and THIS has become one of the most important truths I ever learned about living the Christian life.

For years, I subscribed to a wonderful magazine for pastors called *Leadership Journal*. In one of the issues, the editor, a former minister, dealt with the relationship of faith and feeling in a question and answer section of the magazine entitled “The Feelings are Gone...is God?” The question from one young person was:

When I go to conferences and youth group retreats, I feel like I get very close to God. But then I come home, and I back away from my faith. I love Jesus and want to grow in my personal relationship with him, but how can I stay close to God like when I am at conferences?

His response was:

I'm glad you've experienced the joy of feeling close to God. I have, too, and those are special moments. Conferences and other inspiring events like that are like inhaling—you can feel yourself getting filled. But inhaling can't continue indefinitely. We need to exhale, too.

In our walk with God, the “exhaling” means going out to serve others, living by faith and not by sight, and trusting God even when we don't sense his presence at the moment. All that is an important part of the spiritual life, too.

Some people have pointed out that we all enjoy “mountaintop experiences” —those high points like you describe at conferences and retreats—but most of our daily growth takes place in the valleys. It's in the struggle and the daily routines that we put into practice what we've seen on the mountaintop. Those mountaintop feelings are great, but they are only feelings. God calls us to live by faith and to commit ourselves to living fully for him—by regularly praying, following his will and reading our Bibles—no matter how we're feeling. Hopefully you'll have opportunities to both inhale and exhale regularly.

But if our faith is not ultimately dependent upon how we feel at any given moment, neither is it a purely intellectual exercise. Sometimes we make the mistake of confusing “faith” or our personal trust in God and God's promise to us with “The Faith,” that is, with the assorted creeds and confessions of our church and denomination. Well as important as it is to find our understanding of faith guided and informed by the basic tenets of Christianity and of the Reformed Faith, it is NOT the same as our individual and personal commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and his consistent love and faithfulness towards US. TRUE faith must make the journey from our FEELINGS, that is- our GUT, and from our INTELLECT, that is- our HEAD, to that of our WILL- which is our HEART!

Now if we are asked NOT to place ultimate trust in the ups and downs of our emotions nor in completely trusting the power of our reason and intellect, then where DO we go? Jesus answered this himself when he said, “If a person loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”(Jn. 14:23) YOU OBEY HIS WORD, THAT's how! It's not a matter of feelings at all. As Christians, we are commanded to walk by FAITH, and to walk by faith is nothing less than to TRUST IN THE PROMISE that God loves us with an everlasting love and know that NOTHING will ever separate us from either his love or his presence. Despite how we may happen to feel, our confidence lies in the assurance that our relationship with God is PERMANENT and that it CAN be trusted. God said to Jeremiah, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love.”(Jer. 31:3); and to the prophet Isaiah, he promised, “For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee.”(Is. 54:10); and in the Epistle to the Hebrews, God

assured his followers, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”(Heb. 13:5) Saint Paul insisted to the church in Corinth that “we walk by faith and not by sight” while St. John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, quotes Jesus as saying to Thomas, a man who had doubted him until he had more proof, “Blessed are they that have not seen (or felt), and yet have believed.”

Martin Luther understood this all-too well and wrote a very poignant poem about it:

*For feelings come and feelings go
And feelings are deceiving;
My warrant is the Word of God,
Naught else is worth believing.
 Though all my heart should feel condemned
 For lack of some sweet token;
 There is One greater than my heart
 Whose Word cannot be broken!
I'll trust in God's unchanging Word
Till soul and body sever;
For, though all things shall pass away,
His Word shall stand forever!*

The promise of God's abiding love and faithfulness in the midst of all our ups and downs, in spite of all our mountaintop and valley experiences becomes the ONLY assurance you or I shall ever need, not how we happen to feel from one moment to the next. It serves as the ONLY standard and the ONLY foundation upon which to base our lives- not how WE HAPPEN TO FEEL ABOUT GOD at that particular moment but rather HOW GOD HAPPENS TO FEEL ABOUT US- both now and forever. Let us pray...

Lord God, the one, the only thing that you desire of your children is that we should humbly trust you in simple faith. Let this be the one thing in which we seek our happiness- to honor and please you by a faith that firmly holds onto you and your promise to us to love us forever and never let us go. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.