
LEAVING IS LOVING

“Woman, behold your son” John 19:26 RSV

The gospel is full of rhetorical challenges that test our faith and buck against human nature.

“It is far more blessed to give than to receive.”¹

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”²

“Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour.”³

But no statement is as confusing or frightening as the one in Matthew 19:29. “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

The part about leaving land and fields I can understand. It is the other part that causes me to cringe. It’s the part about leaving mom and dad, saying goodbye to brothers and sisters, placing a farewell kiss on a son or daughter. It is easy to parallel discipleship with poverty or public disgrace, but leaving my family? Why do I have to be willing to leave those I love? Can sacrifice get any more sacrificial than that?

“Woman, behold your son.”

Mary is older now. The hair at her temples is gray. Wrinkles have replaced her youthful skin. Her hands are

calloused. She has raised a houseful of children. And now she beholds the crucifixion of her firstborn.

One wonders what memories she conjures up as she witnesses his torture. The long ride to Bethlehem, perhaps. A baby’s bed made from cow’s hay. Fugitives in Egypt. At home in Nazareth. Panic in Jerusalem. “I thought he was with you!” Carpentry lessons. Dinner table laughter.

And then the morning Jesus came in from the shop early, his eyes firmer, his voice more direct. He had heard the news. “John is preaching in the desert.” Her son took off his nail apron, dusted off his hands, and with one last look said goodbye to his mother. They both knew it would never be the same again. In that last look they shared a secret, the full extent of which was too painful to say aloud.

Mary learned that day the heartache that comes from saying goodbye. From then on she was to love her son from a distance; on the edge of the crowd, outside of a packed house, on the shore of the sea. Maybe she was even there when the enigmatic promise was made, “Anyone who has left...mother...for my sake.”

Mary wasn’t the first one to be called to say goodbye to loves ones for sake of the kingdom. Joseph was called to be an orphan in Egypt. Jonah was called to be a foreigner in Nineveh. Hannah sent her firstborn son away to serve in the temple. Daniel was sent from Jerusalem to Babylon. Nehemiah was sent from Susa to Jerusalem. Abraham was sent to sacrifice his own son. Paul had to say goodbye to his heritage. The Bible is bound together with goodbye trails and stained with farewell tears.

In fact, it seems that *goodbye* is a word all too prevalent in the Christian’s vocabulary. Missionaries know it well. Those who send them know it, too. The doctor who leaves the city to work in the jungle hospital has said it. So has the Bible translator who lives far from home. Those who feed the hungry, those who

¹ Acts 20:35

² Luke 9:24

³ Matthew 13:57

teach the lost, those who help the poor all know the word
goodbye.

Airports. Luggage. Embraces. Taillights. “Wave to
grandma.” Tears. Bus terminals. Ship docks. “Goodbye Daddy.”
Tight throats. Ticket counters. Misty eyes. “Write me!”

Question: What kind of God would put people through
such agony? What kind of God would give families and then ask
you to leave them? What kind of God would give you friends and
then ask you to say goodbye?

Answer: A God who knows that the deepest love is built
not on passion and romance but on a common mission and
sacrifice.

Answer: A God who knows that we are only pilgrims and
that eternity is so close that any “Goodbye” is in reality a “See
you tomorrow.”

Answer: A God who did it himself.

“Woman, behold your son.”

John fastened his arm around Mary a little tighter. Jesus
was asking him to be the son that a mother needs and that in some
ways he never was.

Jesus looked at Mary. His ache was from a pain far
greater than that of the nails and thorns. In their silent glance they
again shared a secret. And he said goodbye.