

## Good Friday Homily

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The primary quality of community is a deep sense of being gathered by God. In his living and his dying, Jesus gathered us together and showed us what it is to live a compassionate life.

Several years ago, a friend named Mary invited my husband Mark and I over for dinner. We would frequently play Pinochle for hours together with Mary and Mark's uncle Dennis.

When we arrived for dinner that night, Mark's uncle was there and a few other friends as well. What Mary shared with us that evening was that she was dying of cancer. As we sat around her kitchen table, Mary said that she had asked us over so that we could be a support to her, but just as important to her was that we be a support to each other in the months to come.

Several months later, Mary again gathered us all together. Because she had lost so much weight, and was so frail, I remember trying to sit very gently on the side of her bed. I hugged her, held her in my arms, and stroked the back of her head. Her hair had started growing back after the chemotherapy, but it was still very short and very soft.

Mary said good-bye to each of us that day while we consoled one another outside her bedroom door.

Years later, after the birth of our son Zachary, I was so vividly reminded of that moment one night when I rocked Zachary to sleep. As I stroked the back of his head, and caressed his soft, baby hair, I remembered holding Mary in the very same way.

So I realize that God gathers us together through our friends, our children, our families, and our communities.

But the first challenge of community is being gathered at all in the first place. It's hard to be gathered when our spirits are far away-holding onto frustrations or angers, distracted by work schedules, or school projects. Maybe we've been slighted by a sibling or we're feeling blinded by envy. Perhaps we disagree with our neighbors' politics or we can't let go of a grudge. How are we being called to open ourselves to community? Who, in our lives, is reaching out to us? How do we respond?

The second challenge of community, once we've been gathered, is to find a way of living together in compassion. Compassion is a lot more than sympathy. It's about being in solidarity

and wanting to alleviate the suffering of those around us. Compassion is about Jesus' mother Mary, watching her son die on the cross and about each one of us walking in fellowship with Christ.

My nephew Jeremy suffers from bipolar disorder. He's now 25 years old, and still living with my sister-in-law Charlene and brother-in-law Mark in Minnesota. For years, they've watched as Jeremy repeatedly becomes alienated from his peers, as he struggles to work independently, and as he longs for a future filled with friends and family. Occasionally, Jeremy will decide to stop taking his medications, and will enter a manic phase.

This happened again just last month. When he hadn't slept in several days and several nights, Char and Mark asked Jeremy to come with them to the hospital. He refused, and Mark was forced to ask the police for assistance. Char wrote to us and shared the pain of seeing her son taken out of the house in handcuffs. If only I could have traded places with him, she said. I would gladly have taken his place.

We are each of us being gathered by God. The night before his death, knowing that he was to die on the cross, Jesus gathered his friends together. He took the time to instruct them and guide them, to explain what it is to live in fellowship with one another.

We hear it again, as Jesus is moments from death. Saying to his mother, there is your son. And to John, there is your mother. Mary becomes the mother of us all, and his beloved disciple represents all of us as children of God. We are called to be responsible for each other and to each other. We are called to be responsible friends, parents, brothers, and sisters.

As Mary watched her son die on the cross, through our own sufferings, we share to some degree in her pain. We, too, wish we could alleviate the suffering of Jesus. Like my friend Mary, like Char, and like Jesus' own mother at the cross, may we open ourselves to live together in compassion.