**John 19:25-27** Passion Reading: Mark 14:27-52 March 3,2015

**Am I My Brother’s Keeper?**

Dear Friends In Christ,

If anyone asks what was the most difficult thing about living in Africa, I might tell you, “A country with a different language and culture makes every part of life difficult,” or “It was a lot of work for Lisa because she had to make every single meal, every single day, from scratch.” One thing I haven’t answered before is brought out in tonight’s reading and theme, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

What do I mean? Consider that our family income, while very close to the median in America, puts us into the 1%er category in Malawi. Malawi is one of the ten poorest nations in the world. Every day we drove by the beggars on the streets—literally standing in between lanes of traffic on the main streets at stoplights. Commuting to work on my bicycle, I usually pedalled through the smoke of smoldering piles of trash. That question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” never leaves the American Christian alone in Malawi. It makes life uncomfortable at many points.

Even in a wealthier country like America, this question should come to mind. We know there are people around us who need help. Sometimes it is due to poverty, but there are also those with medical difficulties and physical handicaps; children who need father-figures (think Big Brother program here); and more.

But on our side, there are reasons we don’t help more. Most of us live in poverty in regard to time. Some of the very basics of life do not get done because we don’t have enough time. If we don’t have time for our own lives, how can we spend it on others? At most points of life, we don’t have a lot of extra money around either.

Then there is distance. Troubles in general tend to isolate people when they most need the help of others. And then we may not want to wrestle with the difficult and uncomfortable question of how to help.

More than that, we don’t particularly like problems that swallow up all our efforts and still remain. (Remember, Jesus himself said, “The poor you will always have with you” (Mk 14:7).) That makes it very frustrating to even bother trying to help.

We also have the convenient excuses that are at least partly true.

Then there is the government – which may have good motives – but by stepping in the breach on behalf of the others, our help is given only by obligation through tax laws rather than through loving concern for fellow people. There are so many reasons we don’t help more.

Tonight, considering that question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” we again go near the cross to see our Savior. In that respect it is like our other evenings. But there is something different in these three verses this evening. Those other two readings— when Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them”* and *“Today you will be with me in Paradise”*—those are caught up in the grand epic story of Jesus, the Son of God, come to pay for the sins the world. Tonight – well, it is an intensely personal event, not directly related to salvation. It is not Jesus on the world stage fulfilling the great sacrifice for all mankind. He is not on stage, but in a small room with the two dearest people in his life. And all the insults and agony of the crucifixion’s darkness fade into the background as Jesus speaks with his friend and his mother about earthly matters. Step close and listen.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Look at Jesus, putting aside his agony and work and caring for those closest to him. Almost none of us make good patients. We know that when we feel sick, we get self-centered. The more so as the pain and discomfort increase. We think, “Let me be by myself, wrapped in a blanket, in silence. Give me the medicine to feel better, otherwise, please leave me alone.”

Yet Jesus, in the midst of his pain bends his mind to serve the loved ones around him. His mother was his responsibility; Jesus was her oldest son. He needed to set right her care before he passed away. So he committed her to his most beloved disciple, the disciple John.

Most likely, Jesus committed her to John rather than his brothers because, it is noted elsewhere, *“his own brothers did not believe in him”* (John 7:5). Later they did, but not just yet (Acts 1:14). Don’t we Christians feel closer to fellow Christians than to unbelieving family members? How fitting it is to entrust her to the care of a Christian friend! On a cross, there was little that Jesus could do for his dear mother. But he showed his concern (which in itself is a great deal!) and he offered all the help he could. ***“‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, “‘Here is your mother’”*** (26-27).

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Do not only consider Jesus, the prime example of love. Consider the others. ***“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.”*** Think of what it cost these women to be there. Certainly Jesus’ enemies who boldly insulted him while he hung dying were not afraid to trouble the women near his cross. Those women were a known quantity to the enemies. These women were part of the group which accompanied Jesus wherever he went. Now the one they had aided and abetted was under the death sentence. Showing up at the cross would make them easy targets. But they had to be there for Jesus.

How many had been in the crowds fed by Jesus months earlier? Thousands. But as the political waves turned against Jesus, they fled like a falling tide. And now, at the cross, it seems that even the Twelve closest to Jesus had deserted him. But here were these few women standing by him even when Jesus asked, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* They can do nothing but be there. They cannot end his pain. They cannot give him anything to drink. They are only sympathetic witnesses, but most importantly they are there. Remember that when you ask yourself, “What can I do to help?” Being there is the most important bit of it. Women inately understand that better than men who have a need to do something. The faithfulness and fidelity of these women will be spoken in the Gospel to the end of time.

And do not forget John, who seems to have been the one disciple present. John, who when another’s mother was committed to him, ***“From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.”*** Yes, he understood what it meant to be his brother’s keeper. He would honor one of Jesus’ last words, and the needs of his friend’s mother by caring for her, for the rest of her life.

Many sermons try to deal with a problem and give you practical specific solutions. I hope that my sermons generally do. The problem this evening is that question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” But I do not think that “Three rules for charity” or “Four ways to help those who need help” is really the answer. This evening, the best answer is to stand there as a silent witness close to the cross. Stand there shoulder to shoulder with Mary and John and that small knot of women. Let all the surrounding sounds and sights and people of the crucifixion fade into the background. Witness and wonder what goes on between them and ask yourself, “What does it mean that I am my brother’s keeper?” Amen.