

THE SEVENTH WORD

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Luke 23:46

These are the last words that Jesus spoke before he gave up his last breath. It is breath that animates our physical bodies. And that breath is given to us as gift. then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. Gen. 2:7

In these past weeks as hospitals and governments have scrambled to provide ventilators for those struggling with the most serious cases of COVID-19, we've been mindful of the value and preciousness of being able to take a simple breath.

There is another animating force that God has gifted to us and that is the gift of God's spirit. God's spirit makes our human experience fuller and richer. The spirit nurtures in us feelings of joy and peace and leads us to expressions of compassion, justice, love, and generosity.

From the cross, Jesus gives up his last breath and also commits his spirit to God the Father. In the absence of breath and spirit the frailness of humanity and the fullness of God's life infusing power are revealed in the body of Jesus.

Take a moment and close your eyes and take several slow deep breaths. Pray this prayer which is both petition and pledge from Psalm 31: 1-5

*In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily.*

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

*You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out
of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.*

*Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me,
O Lord, faithful God. Amen*



THE FIRST WORD

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

Luke 23: 32-43

Walking to school in the 4th grade, my older sister and her best friend had a bitter argument. I can't tell you what their fight was about, but what happened the next day during the apology stands out in my memory. Her friend said, "I'm sorry," and my sister's response, said in a dismissively haughty voice, was "I don't accept 'I'm sorries.'"

Forgiveness is such a tricky thing. Just when we think we might have forgiven someone, the offense will rear its ugly-headed memory during a tense moment with that person. To complicate forgiveness matters further, we live amidst an unforgiving culture; where the practice of taking an eye-for-an-eye is more celebrated than turning the other cheek.

Radical forgiveness, especially without a "sorry", has no place here.

Jesus' culture was just as unforgiving as ours, yet we see Jesus engaging in radical forgiveness at one of his most vulnerable times. He sets a standard of forgiveness that is to make all the "little Christs" look different from the rest of the culture.

"Forgive them, for they do not know what they do," Jesus prays for the executioners. Do you think he is specifically asking God's help to forgive them? After all, these are likely some of the men who participated in beating, whipping, spitting on, and mocking Jesus. It got very brutally personal there. It is so much harder to forgive when the offense comes head-on, leaving you physically and mentally battered. Yet, Jesus shows us the way to forgiveness even without the "sorries".

"Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise," Jesus answers the thief. Forgiveness rolls off Jesus' tongue as if it had been there all along, waiting to burst forth. Do you think it is easier to forgive the thief because his offense wasn't personal or because the thief confessed before Jesus? I wish I truly knew.

In the midst of our unforgiving culture, we are called to set the bar of forgiveness high. Especially we are reminded of the prayer Jesus taught us in which we pray, "Forgive us our sins [in the same way] as we forgive those who sin against us." (My paraphrase).

What, if anything, in your mind is not forgivable?

What makes it easier for you to forgive someone?

Are you more or less forgiving now than you were 10 years ago?

Rev. Dr. Cyndi Bloise, pastor, Jefferson UMC

THE SIXTH WORD

It is Finished

John 19:30

When my son AJ was little, we had to learn sign language to help him learn to speak. AJ loved "more" and "help" and "play" and "cookie". For me? "Finished" was my favorite sign! An active four year old needs the word finished in his vocabulary. So did his exhausted mom!

I have been pondering the word "finished" and what it means for us as Christians. When someone dies, "it is finished" resonates. Finished seeps into our pores and invades our very being.

Death leave us feeling hopeless. Where do we turn? What do we do?

In this time of self-quaranting, being isolated makes us more aware. We are hyper-sensitive to all of our doubts, fears, concerns, and worries. We can get sucked into the "it is finished" mantra.

As we walk through Good Friday, we know for sure that death is not the end of this story. In fact, Friday inches us toward Sunday, filled with new beginnings and yes, RESURRECTION! We have life. We have put down our sin. The price has been paid. Our guilt, our sadness, our frustration--they are FINISHED.

Jesus calls to us from the cross, telling us "it is finished." You don't have to hold on to your pain or your sorrow. They no longer have a claim on your life. You have been set free.

Today, I invite you to consider your sins. Consider the past which weigh you down. Take a moment to reflect on them. Now, repeat "It is Finished." Say it once. Say it several times. Your hurts were not meant to be a place where you are to take root. It is finished. The price was paid.

You are free. It is finished. Hang on, Sunday is coming!

Rev. Dawn Lynn Check, pastor, Otterbein UMC, Greensburg

THE FIFTH WORD

I Thirst

John 19:28

After being flogged, made to wear a crown of thorns, mocked, scorned, betrayed by those whom he loved and healed, abandoned by his closest friends then entrusting the care of his mother to a dear friend knowing that his earthly life was about to end – after all THIS, Jesus knew that all was now finished. After all THIS – he said “I am thirsty.”

There are numerous events during Holy Week, particularly on Good Friday, that depict the extent to which the incarnate God is willing to go to draw us into a right relationship and in turn, invite others to do so as well. The “this” in John 19: 28 refers to the awful suffering, grief and loss Jesus endured to bring us salvation and to take away our sins. It might seem a bit odd, perhaps, to hear him say after all “this” – “I am thirsty.”

I was preparing an hour and a half session about Jesus and the Woman of Samaria recorded earlier in John’s Gospel (John 4: 4-30). Back and forth the conversation goes covering things like protocol between Jews and Samaritans, a theology lesson about ancestors and living water, to proper worship, to a proclamation by the woman that the Messiah is coming and for the first time – Jesus proclaims “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” It was a life transforming exchange for the woman at the well who ran to the very people she spent years avoiding just to tell them “Come and See.”

Studying the Samaritan woman led me to a personal epiphany - all THIS took place because Jesus was thirsty and asked for a drink. In that simple act of hospitality, Jesus saw an opportunity to engage one who was separated from the community, into a powerful life-changing conversation.

“I am thirsty” is a stark reminder of the call placed on our lives. The call, as Christians, to love in a way that reflects Christ’s earthly ministry of invitation and on the cross of salvation

Words to reflect upon from the hymn “You Who Are Thirsty #2132 *The Faith We Sing*

You who are thirsty, come to the well and drink from waters flowing.

You who are hungry, come to the bread and eat of his holiness.

You who are tired, find rest. You who are weak, find strength.

You who are thirsty, come to the well and drink.

He will freely feed all of them who are weak.

He will quench the righteous thirst of all who humbly seek.

THE SECOND WORD

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Luke 23:43

Jesus hung on a cross and two others, labeled as “thieves” hung there too. Those who gathered were mocking Jesus: “Can he save himself?” One of the thieves was mocking Jesus, while the other sensed that there was more to Jesus. With the crowds yelling and the guards taunting, one thief who was about to die cries out to Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”

Jesus responds: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The thief had a choice, and he chose to believe in Jesus. Was he a follower? Maybe from a distance. Did he pray a prayer of repentance on his cross? The Scripture does not record that. Did he publicly declare Jesus to be his Lord? Not really. Yet Jesus reached out to him and seeing his limited faith, still promised him eternal life.

Some people could see this as a last-minute attempt to “get saved.” He was most likely desperate, and I believe Jesus saw his heart. These words of Jesus come to me as words of comfort and encouragement. I can only imagine what that meant to that man hanging on a cross next to Jesus.

In these few words, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,” I feel God’s mercy and I know God’s grace. It is not what we have done or fail to do that lands us a ticket for paradise. Our entrance comes down to trusting in Jesus. And even from the vantage point of equally physical pain, this sinner trusted Jesus and asked.

A few years ago, I was counseling with a couple preparing for marriage. The future husband declared several times that he did not believe in God, but it was important to have a church wedding. I pushed him several times on that and got nowhere. Finally, he said in a rather low voice, “I want to get married in the church and have God’s blessing just in case?”

Do we walk in faith, just in case? Do we believe in Jesus, just in case he might be real? Or do we put our full trust in Jesus so we will be remembered when he comes into his kingdom?

The thieves on the crosses next to Jesus had a choice. We have a choice too. As I meditate on these words, I feel God’s mercy and grace in abundant ways. I see Jesus offer of new life to the thief and I am struck that it is offered to me as well. The thief did not know the scripture or creeds or traditions. Yet he believed and it was more than “just in case.”

If there is one major lesson from these stay at home days, for me, it is a new look at what is most important in my life. There are so many things that divide us in our world and in our church. But there is so much more that unites us, if we give it a chance. It makes me want to be part of the kingdom today!

THE THIRD WORD

Woman, behold thy son

John 19:26-27

In my house we spend a lot of time discussing what it means to be a family. Since our family (solo mom and two kids) looks different than other more traditional families, I've tried to offer my children different definitions of "family" by exposing them to a variety of different kinds. We read the book, *Who's in a Family*, which introduces us to Carlos and his mom, dad and sister; and Laura and Kyle who live with their two moms; or Ricky who has two families with separated parents. As the book reminds us, families are the people who love us the most- whatever that looks like.

In these words from Jesus on the cross, Jesus once again redefines what it means to be family. It's not longer about biological relationship, where we live and who we live with, or who we've been with the longest. It's now about those who are gathered together at the cross, drawn together in moments of despair, and how they must care for each other in face of uncertainty and pain.

Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells us "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:30). The new family that Jesus offers us is one that is created in the pain of the cross and with the hope of an empty tomb. The opening line of the book says families "can be made up in many different ways." In these words from the cross, Jesus establishes a new family and calls each of us to live into this new family every day. How are you fulfilling Jesus' call into a family of faith in the midst of your everyday lives?

Reflections Questions

Who belongs in your Jesus-family?

How can you show love to your family today?

Musical Reflection: "Who Is My Mother, Who Is My Brother" The Faith We Sing #2225

Who is my mother, who is my brother? All those who gather round Jesus Christ:

Spirit Blown people, born from the Gospel sit at the table, round Jesus Christ.

Love will relate us- color or status can't segregate us, round Jesus Christ;

Family failings, human derailings- all are accepted, round Jesus Christ.

Rev. Kelly Smith, pastor, Mifflin Avenue and South Avenue UMCs

THE FOURTH WORD

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34

When we look at the person who is Jesus and try to understand his relationship with God we typically look at it in two ways. Jesus often talks about God as the Father and Jesus is God's son born of a virgin Mary. That is one way to help us understand the relationship between God and Jesus. That is the human way. The other way is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is God. Jesus is fully human, the Son of God but Jesus is also fully divine, God's-self. We turn to those words where Jesus asks God, his Father and his divine self why have you forsaken me and in those moments, it was a denial of his divinity. It was a fulfillment of the complete and absolute surrender of all that Jesus was on the cross so that we would never have to know absolute death. It does not mean that Jesus ceased to be human or divine, but Jesus surrendered these parts of himself to face utter death and the gates of hell. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul says, "God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." As Jesus went somewhere we could not follow, Jesus also became something God never wanted us to be. As he surrendered his humanity and his divinity, he took on himself the sins of the world in order to abolish them forever and give us a way to become the righteousness of God.

This is not the first time that these words were spoken. We first hear these words in Psalm 22. Psalm 22 begins with the very same question of, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." However, Psalm 22 does not end there. It is ultimately a Psalm of hope and a Psalm of Salvation. To those who witnessed the crucifixion and those who read the story it might seem as a forsakenness that is complete and absolute but in Jesus' proclamation it is a forsakenness to fulfill a purpose that ends in resurrection and salvation for those who call upon the name of God. There might be moments in our life where we have this same sense of abandonment. Where is God in what feels like the shut down of the world because of the Coronavirus? Where is God when it feels like we will walk the road to the empty tomb alone? Where is God as those bills pile up yet the money has stopped coming in? Where is God in the last breath of those who have died without their loved ones surrounding them? Where is God when...What we learn from the greater story of the crucifixion of Christ and his resurrection is that the darkness, the confusion, the sense of forsakenness will only last for a little while. Christ became what we could not be and went where we could not go so that we could carry with us the eternal hope of the resurrection and a light powerful enough to break through our darkness. We were not meant to wonder where is God, but to understand through Jesus' proclamation that God is right here with us. Amen.

Rev. Hannah Loughman, pastor, First UMC, Butler