

GOOD FRIDAY 2021 – Saginaw First U.M.C
Reflections on the Seven Last Utterances of Christ
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Mark 15:33-34 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**"

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part I

It's interesting to me that so many people—Biblical scholars especially—are profoundly disturbed by this particular expression of Jesus on the cross. Surely, Jesus didn't quail or recoil from his duty...did he? Surely, he didn't give up on God...did he? Biblical scholars are quick to point out that these words that Jesus cries out from the cross come from Psalm 22. Jesus, being well schooled in Torah, would have likely known all the psalms by heart, for they were the hymns of his day. And in those days, when one said a line, it called to mind the entire psalm. Psalm 22 begins as a lament about pain and suffering, but ends as an expression of praise. And so, what looks like an expression of doubt is, in fact, a statement of faith and praise. So say the scholars.

But I guess I'm not much of a scholar. I cannot so readily dismiss the line Jesus chooses to utter. He must have been in terrible agony when he said it, the pain garbling his words to such an extent that the people standing around his cross didn't understand what he said. They thought he was crying out for Elijah. I have to believe that Jesus knows what it is to suffer. I have to believe that he, like me, knows what it is to doubt, to question, to be afraid, and to endure in spite of it all. Otherwise, how could he understand me?

Because I'll be honest: I have my doubts, questions, and fears. There are things I simply don't understand! That's okay. I've never expected to be kept in the private council of the Almighty. But there are times when the doubts, fears and questions are suffocating—usually when I am either experiencing or witnessing suffering first hand. A child dies. Why! Cancer claims another life in its prime. Why! A man beats an Asian woman on the street and no one does anything. Why? Another mass shooting rips apart a town. Why?

I believe Jesus Christ is the begotten Son of God, who died for my sins and rose again to life after three days—I believe that with all my heart! But I also believe he understands our humanness. I believe that in his agony, he asked himself, however briefly, "What am I doing here, dying like this? God, why have you forsaken me?"

He obviously came up with an answer. He was submitting himself to God's will. He was giving hope and life to humankind. He quickly grabbed hold of the truth—suffering does not mean that God has abandoned us. Instead, God suffers with us. In facing the fear, the anguish, the injustice of it, he conquered it and saw it through to the other side.

Some have tried to argue that true faith puts doubts, fears, questions, and the like to rest. I disagree. Rather, true faith acknowledges the reality of our humanness, and goes on anyway. I want to grow more like Jesus. When I suffer, I want to know nothing but love for those around me, and I want the strength to persevere in trust, giving God the last word.

Luke 23:32-35 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with two other criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, **“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”** The soldiers cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him...

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part II

If there is anything in scripture that has the power to reduce me to tears, it is this particular utterance from Jesus. As he hung from a cross in excruciating agony—his body slowly shutting down, his lungs collapsing—he somehow retained control of his emotional and mental state. Even in his pain, he had the power of empathy.

I can imagine him, looking out at the crowd who mocked him, and almost see the wheels turning in his mind. The Jewish people were oppressed under one of the cruelest and most violent conquerors that world history has known: the Roman Empire. You and I (who have been born and bred in the land of the free and the home of the brave) have little or no concept of how such oppression fed fear and selfish survival instincts. We don't know what it's like to live in a place where people may be arrested, tortured, and killed without trial merely for speaking their mind. We don't know what it's like to live without law—where tax collectors could take every last cent of a person's income, plus their homes and businesses, and there was no recourse. We don't really understand the fear or the animosity it bred. But Jesus did.

We wonder how a crowd could clamor for his crucifixion. How could they not see the charges were trumped up because he threatened a few who were powerful? We don't understand their fear or their rage. But Jesus did. Jesus did. And he knew they didn't understand the sacrifice he was making...at least, not yet.

Forgiveness today is still built upon empathy. It is the ability to try and understand another. ‘How could they do that to me?’ we wonder. How indeed? It is in answering that question that forgiveness is born.

And still today, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” – forever holding out hope that we, too, will take his outstretched hand of forgiveness, and embrace his example of empathy for all of humankind.

Luke 23:39-43 ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus replied, **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part III

Two criminals are being crucified with Jesus. One is truly desperate. He just wants Jesus to get them out of this. “Free yourself and us,” he pleads. I confess that I feel for him. He may be guilty of some horrendous crime, or he may simply be a political prisoner—one who has angered the powers-that-be by protesting or advocating for rebellion. Whatever his crime, I can imagine the pain and terror he might be feeling.

But that other criminal is more introspective, seemingly more in tune with what is happening to Jesus. To the other criminal, he says, “You and I are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong.” And then he turns to Christ with an extraordinary request: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

Jesus’ response is to offer the only explicit promise of salvation he gives in the scriptures: Today, you will be with me in paradise. James and John are promised martyrdom; their salvation is only implied (Mk 10.35-40). A rare person is told, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mk 12.34). But the only person to whom Jesus gives a point-blank promise is a self-confessed, convicted criminal, who is hanging beside him on a cross.

Jesus was not one to hold our Sin against us indefinitely. Indeed, he gave his life to free us from the power of Sin. What Jesus longed for, more than anything, was a transformed heart and life—one that grows towards God. Hanging beside him is a man who knows his guilt. At some point along the way, he’s taken an honest look at himself and doesn’t like what he discovers. “Remember me” is a plea to know that he matters, that all is not lost, that his life can amount to more than what it has been, even at the bitter end, even despite sin and brokenness. It’s a disguised cry for meaning and purpose. And Jesus responds with an answer that promises the newness for which this man is longing.

The promise is still good for you and I. Jesus did not come to save the perfect, but to heal the broken, and to perfect the willing. While he does not condone our sin, he will not hold our past against us, but forgives and endeavors to free us to go in a new direction. So we, too, must be those who see hope and possibilities for those who are broken or lost. Jesus does not ask us to condone evil and violence, but he does ask us to see beyond it, and to recognize the humanity in criminals and enemies; in mean spirits, angry souls, and violent tempers; indeed, in one another.

John 19:25-27 ^{25b} Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, **“Woman, here is your son.”** ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, **“Here is your mother.”** And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part IV

Mary stands at the foot of the cross, watching her firstborn son die. I wonder if she remembers the words that the prophet Simeon spoke long ago, when Jesus was but eight days old: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

How do we cope watching those we love suffer? Jesus gives an answer, of sorts: together. It seems that companionship was Jesus' solution. "Woman, here is your son," said Jesus. What he meant was, "Take care of each other. Hold each other. Get each other through this crisis."

Those words challenge us in the middle of a pandemic. We are so fortunate that technology today can connect us in ways inconceivable even 25 years ago. We can see each other on zoom. We can get an instant reply when we send a note to a friend half-way around the world. We find things in common and communicate with colleagues in other countries and time zones. When flood rise or fires burn or crowds protest, we see it immediately. And seeing has led many to care more deeply and give more generously. We can celebrate the connectedness that we share in the world today.

But no matter what the chain letters say, we can't email a hug. We can't text listening, and a soundbite isn't enough time to really bear our soul. We need each other. And that is where we've suffered most in the last year. And yet, we've weathered this together, masking up to keep each other safe, staying apart, using technology, and scrambling for the first vaccine we can get.

As we come out of this, we will, at least for awhile, have a new appreciation for togetherness – for touch and hugs and being together in a restaurant or café. Yet human nature is to forget. Jesus challenges us to let this time shape us, grow us, elevate our gratitude. This is your son, your mother. It's not blood that makes you family. It's shared compassion. Value each other. Be there for each other. Fight for each other. And be grateful for each other.

Luke 23:44-46 ⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, **“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”**

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part V

Like some of the other utterances Jesus spoke from the cross, this, too, is taken from the Psalter (Psalm 31:5, to be precise). And as it did before, here, too, one line from the Psalm invokes the whole Psalm. Psalm 31 is, from beginning to end, a song of trust. The singer praises God for God's strength and declares with bold assurance the conviction that God knows what the singer is suffering.

The words of Chris Hainley come to mind here. He writes: “Into your hands I commend my spirit. My spirit. Not my mind or my body. But my spirit. I am asked to give my soul to the Father. The soul which contains who I am, my experiences, my memories, my uniqueness. The soul is the image and likeness of God. We are asked to let go. And in letting go, we are giving ourselves over to God...” [from Chris Hainley, Lane Community College – <http://www.silk.net/RelEd/hands.htm>.]

A story came drifting back into my mind that Tim Hansel tells in *Holy Sweat*: “...When I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal.

“I don't know just when it was that he suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable... It was the shortest distance between two points.

“But when he took the lead, he knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, he said, “Pedal!”

“I worried and was anxious and asked, “Where are you taking me?” He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn to trust.

“I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say, “I'm scared,” he'd lean back and touch my hand.

“...I did not trust him, at first, in control of my life. I thought he'd wreck it; but he knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages.

“And I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ.

“And when I'm sure I just can't do any more, he just smiles and says, “Pedal.” [from Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000, c1998.]

John 19:28-29 ²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), **“I am thirsty.”** ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part VI

I thirst, Jesus says. To fulfill scripture, says the text. But what scripture, and why? It’s so mundane, compared to some of the others. Some scholars point to verse 15 in Psalm 22, where it says, “my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.” Others reference Psalm 69:21b: “For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” Perhaps Jesus is trying to comfort those who look on – his mother, the disciple he loves, the women who have followed – as if to say, “don’t worry, God planned this out long ago.”

Other scholars think it points to Jesus’ humanity. This was not a man faking it, not a spirit that appeared human or any other kind of heresy. The divine Jesus forgives. The human Jesus thirsts. But even more, the human Jesus has nothing left. He who was living water for the world was nearly dried up now. He was spent. He’d given it all and then some. Even Jesus knew what it was to need; to crave; to thirst. Which is why he understand our need.

But perhaps Adam Hamilton offers the best explanation when he writes: “There’s another way of understanding these words. At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and said, “This is my blood of the new covenant” (Matthew 26:28). Elsewhere, when James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at his right hand and his left hand when he came into his kingdom, Jesus replied, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” (Matthew 20:22). Likewise, in John 18:11, as Jesus was being arrested, Peter drew his sword; but Jesus told him, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” In each of these instances, Jesus used the metaphor of drinking as a way of describing the suffering he would endure on the cross.

Jesus’ words “I thirst” may have pointed not only to his willingness to drink the cup of suffering and sin and hate—but to drink it down to the dregs. Given that he was nearing the end, perhaps he was pointing to the fact that the cup was now nearly empty and the task nearly finished. Perhaps he is wetting his throat so he can offer his final word. [2 ¶s from Adam Hamilton: <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/i-thirst-more-here-than-meets-the-eye>]

John 19:30 ³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, **“It is finished.”** Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The Seven Last Utterances of Christ – Part VII

A child is drawing a picture in Sunday School. Industriously, the little boy labors, selecting crayon after crayon, filling his page with color and expression.

“Johnny, what are you drawing?” asks his teacher.

“I’m drawing a picture of God,” Johnny explains.

“But Johnny,” his teacher says with a gentle reminder, “no one knows what God looks like.”

Replies Johnny, “They will when I’m finished.”

Finished. Done. Complete. These are Jesus final words before he dies. It is finished. But what is finished? His suffering? I don’t think so. He suffers still—he suffers every time we suffer. Perhaps his work is finished? Again, clearly not. The state of our world at present is mute testimony to the fact that Jesus’ work is not yet complete.

It is finished. His earthly ministry—his time of humanness. This is what is finished. He’s done what he came to do. Being human, there was always the chance that Jesus could have made another choice—to act in his own mortal best interest. But at last, those opportunities have passed. In dying, it is finished. He’s made the choice final. In his humanness, he has made the choice to honor the divine within—to choose God and the whole of humankind over his baser fears and frailties.

It is in the suffering, the dying, the forfeiture of mortality that the picture of God leaps off the paper. Here is the line in the sand, where the forces of fear, hostility, hatred, and darkness are robbed of power and may go no further. Here is the moment where love wins.

It is finished. Done. Complete. The sketch of God’s plan is given color and depth. Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah foresaw a day when God’s law would be written on our hearts. Here is the etching accomplished. We see him die. The curtain of the temple is ripped in two and all barriers between us and God are finally destroyed. Our hearts are transformed from stone to flesh, and the words inscribed on the flesh of our hearts are the love and grace of God.

It is finished. Done. Complete. Now, let’s live it. Amen.