

“I Thirst”

From the series: The Seven Last Words From the Cross

Text: John 19:28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst." John 19:28

"I thirst," the fifth word from the cross, is as the fourth word is, a word of suffering. Certainly it is an expression of physical suffering, and we're told by some who have experienced it that there is perhaps no greater physical anguish than to suffer thirst. But the word from John, we have learned, is always layered. Certainly John would point to the terrible physical torment of Jesus. But we've come to know from John that the word is never there at its purely literal or simplistic level. John always has something more symbolic to say. Note for a moment, if you would, the contrast of John's lens with the lenses of Mark and Matthew and Luke. That's been the special angle of vision we've been trying to sort out in this Lenten series: to use the words of the cross as lenses through which the respective Evangelists understood the meaning of the depth of Jesus.

These Evangelists, as we have said, were not journalists working for the *Jerusalem Times*. They weren't court reporters getting down every word. They were portrait painters. They were novelist, theologians. They were giving us an interpretation of what was happening. And I think we get an insight into their understanding of what was happening by the words they put into the mouth of Jesus as he's dying – in this case, the word "I thirst."

Note for a moment, the contrasting pictures that we get from John as opposed to the other three. Don't hear me saying that one is right and the other is wrong. Hear me saying that they're different because they are being viewed through a different lens. These are interpretations. For example, last week, we spoke of the word from Mark and Matthew, "My God, My God, Why hath thou abandoned me?" In Mark (which we believe to be the earliest of the four gospels) and in Matthew, this is Jesus' only word. It is a picture of the utter spiritual dereliction and abandonment of Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. Not so in John. In John's gospel, the dying Jesus is in charge as he has been in charge throughout the whole portrait that John paints of Jesus. You remember in the tenth chapter

of John, the Good Shepherd passage, Jesus says no one takes my life from me; I lay it down. Jesus is active in the discharge of his ministry, of his mission. John's Jesus is a Jesus who is in control of the circumstances. And when he says, "I thirst," Jesus is triggering something more than simply expressing his physical anguish. Now the Jesus that John tells us about, again in contrast to the synoptics Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a Jesus who when he comes to the crunch (spoken of by John as "the hour") says, "now is the hour and what shall I say, Father remove this from me? No for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify your name." And in the Garden of Gethsemane there is no prayer as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me." Rather, in John there is simply the arrest in the garden. Peter draws his sword, hacks off an ear of one of those who have come to arrest Jesus, and Jesus reproves him. Jesus says, "The cup that the Father has given me, shall I not drink it?"

Do you feel the difference? To the other gospel writers the picture is of a Jesus who is still struggling against the inevitability. John's picture is of one who says, "Father glorify your name, the hour is here. Let's go through with it. Give me the cup. I must drink the cup." What cup? The cup of suffering, the cup representative of God's will for Jesus' life following faithfully through all the way. That cup. But *cup*? That's interesting, isn't it, to speak of it as a cup. There's a cup there. Where does that cup come from? Well, it comes from the Old Testament feast of Passover, doesn't it? John's Jesus is the Passover lamb. Not for Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The timing of the crucifixion in John is different from the other three. The other three have Jesus celebrating the Passover with his disciples on the night before he was betrayed. John has a different chronology. For John, Jesus is crucified at the very hour when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered at the temple because for John Jesus does not eat the Passover. Jesus is the Passover.

What was the Passover? The people of Israel are slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh is abusing and oppressing them, the sons and daughters of Jacob. God calls Moses and says, "Take my people out of there." So Moses goes to the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh says, "No Way, José." God says, "O.K. we'll start a little action." The plagues. Do you remember the ten plagues? Do you remember what the tenth one was? The first born of every household would be slain by the Angel of Death. What would the Angel of Death do? The Angel of Death would *pass over* the houses of the people of Israel. That's where we get the name Passover. The Angel of Death passing over. Well, how did the Angel of Death know if it was an Egyptian or an Israelite household? The Israelites were prepared by Moses, who got the word from God.

What were they to do? They were to get ready to go, ready to move out, and they were to have a final feast. The central element of the feast was to be a lamb, a lamb roasted whole, no bones broken. And with a branch of hyssop they were to sprinkle the blood of this lamb on their doorposts, so that when the Angel passed over the Israelites, their first-born would be spared. Every year after that, Israel

kept Passover, which was a feast, a celebration. What were they celebrating? Sins forgiven? No, liberation. Freedom. The exodus was perhaps the first great freedom flight in history, and Moses was that revolutionary leader that led God's people out of the house of bondage into freedom and toward the Promised Land. Every year when Israel celebrated the pass-over, there were several cups of wine. And after the final cup of wine, the feast was over.

Now John has Jesus on the cross saying, "I'm thirsty." Is John telling us simply that Jesus was thirsty? That Jesus was suffering terrible physical anguish? Yes, but in this important document in which John is talking about eternal life, do you suppose in that account John would stop simply to have Jesus say, "I'm thirsty" to note a physical thirst? Might there be something more going on? Do you note in the text that we read how Jesus got his thirst quenched? Vinegar. The other gospels say wine. Whatever it was, how did he receive it? On a *hyssop*. Hyssop, the same sort of hyssop that the Israelites used to sprinkle the lamb's blood on their doorposts. Do you think it possible that John was making all of those associations so that we might see that his intention was to present Jesus at this point as symbolic of the Lamb of Liberation? The Jesus who is always in control in John's gospel, who says, "No one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own free will. I do it for my love for the sheep" et cetera, et cetera. This Jesus now, becoming aware that it was all finished, says, "I thirst." I think John was showing us a Jesus in control, who knew now that the work was done. The hour had gone. The hour was there. He had been lifted up. God was being glorified. He said, "I am thirsty," which was another way of saying, "Give me the cup. I am ready to drink it now. I am ready to drain it. I am ready to drain it to the final dregs."

Now I suspect that every time you have ever heard this word preached on over the years the concentration has been on the physical suffering of Jesus. I want to suggest to you that the physical suffering of Jesus is real. And Jesus as a human being really suffered and that's not unimportant. That's why the creed says, "suffered under Pontius Pilot, was dead and buried."

Because one of the greatest challenges to the central understanding of the early church about Jesus and what Jesus did, one of the greatest challenges was the heresy of Gnosticism. Gnosticism believed that matter was evil, and that God could never become entangled with matter. And so the Gnostic denied incarnation, that God could be identified with human flesh, that the word was made flesh. Gnosticism said Jesus walked on the beach but left no footprints. The Gnostic said Jesus' spirit had already left him when he was put on the cross because God could not be identified with that kind of suffering, that kind of material human flesh.

The early church said "no" to that. This was a man. This man really suffered so the physical suffering is not to be devalued. Some Latin American Catholics, this time of year, parade a crucifix through town, and the pilgrims actually flagellate

themselves and draw blood in order to identify with the physical sufferings of Jesus. It works for some who have been raised in that, for whom that conveys real meaning. But I want to suggest that probably, at further review, it's spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically unhealthy. In Protestantism we have our own ways of flagellation. We don't carry the crucifix, but we sing awful hymns. They are full of our vileness, our unworthiness, and of Jesus' awful suffering.

I suspect, however, that if you read through the Lenten hymns, the text of the Lenten hymns, which are so familiar that we don't even think about them, in all honesty you would have to say, "no." "No, It doesn't really bring tears to my eyes. I only say that in a song." The physical suffering is not to be devalued but the physical suffering is not to be exaggerated either because that misses the point of what was happening in the death of Jesus.

I do not believe that the death of Jesus was a religious event. I do not believe the death of Jesus was something that happened between Jesus and God for the salvation of the world. More and more, I am believing that the death of Jesus was a political event. The death of Jesus was the consequence of the way he lived, because the way he lived was a threat to the institutionalized religious hierarchy and the structure of his society.

Jesus sought the liberation of people. Jesus sought to break all forms of human bondage. That's what John is telling us when he makes Jesus the Passover lamb. Jesus was doing for the whole world what Moses did for Israel. Jesus was doing for the whole world what happened when the slaves were set free from the house of bondage in Pharaoh's Egypt. John understood the death of Jesus as a liberating act, as the culmination of a life that had called people to human dignity and to human rights and to freedom.

Jesus' life was not, first of all, a religious life, the life of some aesthetic or some monk. Jesus, in the name of God and in communion with God, with a vision that he felt he received from God and a call and a claim upon his life by God, sought to liberate people, sought to bring dignity to people, sought to include the excluded ones. He sought to touch the lepers, to break down the barriers and all of the exclusivism that ruled people out. And because he did that, they killed him. Jesus was the Passover lamb.

And now he said, "I'm thirsty" in order to trigger the final cup and to empty it, and to complete his work, his work of human liberation. He knew it was now over. He had done what he could do and now it was in God's hands. That's the real nature of Jesus' suffering. The physical suffering should not be devalued but the focus on the physical suffering, and to try to identify oneself with a poor broken Jesus, is to privatize it, to individualize it, to spiritualize it, and to fail to realize that Jesus lived radically in this world.

Jesus lived in order to change the world. Jesus lived in order to set people free from political bondage and from religious structures that bind, and from every

form that devalued and dehumanized the person. It was a political act, and it happened in the world.

The best example I know in the twentieth century was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. About once a year I get this book out. This book cannot be replaced. It's sacred to me. As you know, it kept me alive in Europe: *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Bonhoeffer joined a group that conspired to assassinate Hitler and was imprisoned when the plot failed. And, as you know, on April 8, 1945 he was hung. Bonhoeffer tells in these Letters about how he talked with a French pastor whose goal was to be a saint. And Bonhoeffer said, "I respected him even though I disagreed with him." But he said, "I myself thought that I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life," in other words, the whole religious thing. He says, "It was at that period in my ministry that I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*". And he said, "I still stand by that book, but I would make some changes now." Now he has sat in prison. Now he has seen the world explode. Now he has faced the awful hellish demon of Nazism, and he says, "I am discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself. Whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman, a righteous or unrighteous one. This is what I mean by worldliness. Taking life in one's stride and all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is such a life," he says, "in which we throw ourselves into the arms of God and participate in the sufferings of the world." Here he was in prison for a political act because of his religious conviction and he says, "I don't want to be religious. I want to be worldly in the sense of participating in the world, in the things that God is about, in the causes of human liberation." Then he says, "Then I join the sufferings in this world, and I watch with Christ in Gethsemane."

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism, but to be a person, a human being. It is not some religious act, which makes the Christian what he or she is, but participation in the sufferings of God, in the life of this world. That was tough business. That was tough business for Bonhoeffer. For him to be a follower of Jesus was to join a political conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. See, it had nothing to do with the sanctuary or the altar. It had to do with the life of this world. It had to do with what goes on in Washington and Beijing and the power centers of the world. It's not easy.

Bonhoeffer wrote lines that are the most moving that I know of because I suppose they speak to me, in the poem "Who Am I?" And he tells about how others say, "My goodness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you are so full of joy, so full of power, of hope, you are such a strong man, and they clung to him in prison. But he says, "To myself, Oh, I am weak, full of fear, and trembling. Who am I, this or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once, a hypocrite before others and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?"

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions. Whoever I am, Oh God, thou knowest I am thine."

I think that is a modern story of what Jesus was about. He suffered but he might have said, "The physical anguish of thirst was nothing compared with the torment within my soul. I believed God called me. Did God call me? Did I get it right? Why me? Who am I? Who am I to turn over institutions and traditions? Who am I? Have I got it right?" It's not easy to stick with one's conviction and to live by one's vision. It's much easier to fold up one's tent and fade off into the sunset.

Sometimes I wonder about some of you who stick with the church. Why do you do it? Sometimes I wonder about myself. There certainly would be more peaceful ways to live one's life. Why care? Why make an issue? Why stick to one's guns? Bonhoeffer refers to Luther, who was called to account because of the oppression of the church and he said, "Here I stand, I can do no other." Can do no other, yet you could have done other, Martin Luther. You could have said, "Forget it." You could have said, "Oh, have it your way." But somehow or other he couldn't. He had to say, "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Jesus certainly knew what he was about. Jesus undercut all of the sacred, solid, secure ways by which the power leaders of society controlled the masses and maintained their position. Like the article in the *New York Times* said, referring to the lobbyists against Clinton's health care plan: *The Gold Diggers Are Lining Up In Washington*. They're also jockeying for positions so that when it finally comes down they will be in a position to cash in. That's what the world's about. It is about power. It is about greed. It is about oppression and abuse and the dehumanizing of people and the using of people for personal prerogatives. And every once in a while there is a Bonhoeffer or a Mother Teresa or a Martin Luther King. And they get killed, just like Jesus got killed.

Now Jesus said, "I'm thirsty." John said Jesus said, "I'm thirsty." What John is really signaling to us is that Jesus was saying, "Give me the cup. *Give me* the cup. I'll swallow it to the last drop because I know it's over, but, by God, I've lived my truth."

If you really are serious about identifying with Jesus' suffering, I'll tell you what you do. Don't go off in a closet with a hymnbook and read those awful hymns and weep a while. Hear this word of Jesus: "If you would be my disciple, take up your cross, and follow me." I've got to warn you it could prove very painful, but the end thereof is joy inexpressible. What, greater possession could you possibly have than your soul intact?