



Sermon Series: The Seven Last Words of Jesus

“I Am Thirsty”

FUMC, Arlington, Texas

30 March 2014: Fourth Sunday in Lent

Preaching Text: John 19:25-29

The church has traditionally developed from Gospel harmonies of the passion story Jesus’ final seven last words or phrases from the cross. The “Seven Words” the church also knows as the “Devotion of the Three Hours.” These three hours run from noon on Good Friday to 3:00 P.M. This particular time division remembers Christ’s hours on the cross. We have used the common order of the readings for our sermon series. Here are the seven readings to help us set reading in context:

- 1) Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them.”
- 2) Luke 23:43 “Today you will be with me in paradise.”
- 3) John 19:26-27 “Woman, here is your son.”
- 4) Mark 15:34 “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (also Mt 27:46)
- 5) John 19:28 “I am thirsty.”
- 6) John 19:30a “It is finished.”
- 7) Luke 23:46 “Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Hear the day’s lesson from the Gospel of John:

[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.

[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 (John 19:25-29).

One of the important things we will discover with this last word/phrase of Jesus is that it comes to us via John. This Gospel is vastly different than the Synoptics: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. While true John tells the comparable Jesus story as the Synoptics, the differences are marked. How does John differ



from the Synoptics? For but a few examples, Luke and Matthew relate Jesus' story from his beginnings with his earthly parents Mary and Joseph. John, however, begins Jesus' story with a majestic prologue that sounds like the beginning of Genesis:

[1:1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being [4] in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1-5).

Another difference is that in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' ministry lasts one year, while in John the ministry's duration is three years. We notice this in the three annual Passovers that Jesus celebrates. John also ties his story of Jesus to the observances of the great pilgrimage feasts of Judaism: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Weeks), and Sukkot (Tents/Booths). In the Synoptics Jesus is obviously Jewish, but the Synoptics do not stress Jesus' feast observance as John does. Even the account of Jesus' death is different for John. In contrast to the Synoptics, Jesus is crucified on the day of preparation for the Passover (John 19:31). This means that the Last Supper (the foot washing, John 13) in John is not a Passover feast. For John, Jesus dies at the exact time that the Jews sacrifice the Passover lambs in the temple.

What does John mean when he tells us that when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty?" What could this mysterious (enigmatic/inscrutable) phrase, "I am thirsty" or "I thirst" mean exactly?

First, we could understand Jesus' cry as nothing other than a statement of fact. After being on the cross for several hours and not allowed a drink of anything, this phrase "I am thirsty" might simply suggest that Jesus was, in fact, thirsty.



A second potential meaning for “I am thirsty” might have been a plea for help. Perhaps, like Jesus’ cry in Matthew/Mark, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Those near the cross might have interpreted this as a cry for help. What follows in John’s story bears this out: “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.” Yet, in John’s Gospel Jesus always controls his own fate. For example, Pilate said “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus’ answer: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:10-11).

Third, some think Jesus says, “I am thirsty” so that he can identify with people. This idea elevates the incarnation and sounds reasonable. Yet, John’s Jesus tends to be so lofty and mystical that although we can find traces of incarnational theology in John’s Gospel, it is not one of the Fourth Gospel’s dominant themes.

Someone I respect offered a fourth suggestion. She said that Jesus said, “I am thirsty” because Jesus thirsted for his heavenly home. I like this proposal since it reveals how close Jesus is to completing what God sent him to do. Yet, I confess I only like this suggestion if and only if any of the three Synoptic Gospels would have offered “I am thirsty” rather than John. For John, Jesus does not go to heaven because heaven for John is wherever Jesus is. Thus, in a terribly ironic sense, the cross is the throne of glory, and indeed “heaven” because this is where God enthrones Jesus as the “Lamb of God!” (John 1:36). This Jesus himself said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). Jesus does not need to go anywhere to be



“in heaven.” Rather heaven is where Jesus is.

For these reasons I now suggest that Jesus’ cry, “I am thirsty” is a symbolic utterance. It is symbolic because you will find these words: “in order to fulfill the scripture.” If I am reading correctly, then this means Jesus said, “I am thirsty” not to declare a fact, not to cry for help, and not necessarily to identify with earthly and earthy creatures. Rather, Jesus cries out to fulfill scripture. Since John sees Jesus as his own master, perhaps John refers to Psalm 22 here we find this statement:

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death (Psalm 22:15).

This view of a symbolic utterance makes even more sense when we remember Jesus’ words earlier in John’s Gospel. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:17-18). Jesus is in control from the beginning to the end!

The cup of suffering is what God has ordained Jesus to drink for our sake. At the beginning of Jesus’ Passion story, instead of having Jesus pray that the Father might take the cup of suffering from him (Mark 14:36), John portrayed Jesus as rebuking Peter drawing his sword to resist the arresting party: “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). Thus, “I am thirsty” shows that same determination to drink the cup (Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1994, p. 1074 [Volume 2]). To drink the cup means to follow God’s will wherever it may lead.

How do we fulfill God’s claim on our life and drink the cup that Jesus



drinks? Greater disciples have asked this. One day, James and John asked Jesus “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” However, Jesus replied, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” Naturally, they responded, “We are able” (a rephrase of Mark 10:35-39).

The Lenten question for each of us is: Can we really follow Jesus? Sometimes the things faith asks of us will please us. Other times faith forces us to examine ourselves with a self-scrutiny that few of us enjoy. The only way any of us can really follow Jesus is to deny ourselves and take up his cross. My prayer for myself and for you is that we all realize that this is THE question of faith. May God’s spirit of grace and good courage give us the faith to meet whatever tasks our Lord has in store for us. Amen.