



## **Sermon Series: The Seven Last Words of Jesus**

“It is Finished”

FUMC, Arlington, Texas

6 April 2014: Fifth Sunday in Lent

Communion Sunday Preaching Text: John 19:28-30a

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” 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. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:28-30).

To understand Jesus’ phrase, “It is finished,” we need to recognize John’s view of Jesus’ crucifixion. As we said last week, in John’s crucifixion story, Jesus dies when the religious officials sacrifice the temple lambs. This timing differs by one day from the Synoptics. For John, Jesus does not symbolize the Passover lamb—Jesus is the Passover lamb. As Passover represents liberation from Egyptian bondage, so Jesus liberates all people from the shackles of sin and death.

What in our lesson leads us to this conclusion? One clue John supplies is the mention of hyssop—a small flimsy plant. “Botany-types” might spot such an oddity and arch a brow when reading the text: “They put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.” The hyssop plant would be a strange choice to lift a heavy sponge full of wine to a height of seven or eight or more feet off the ground. The hyssop plant is too flimsy to do the job. Yet, John is not interested in practicalities as in theology. This is why John mentions the hyssop plant.

In Exodus we read the Passover directions. God tells Moses and Aaron: “Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin” (Exodus 12:1, 22a). Later that night, as the angel of death swept over Egypt, God protected the Hebrews



from the avenging angel and spared their first-born. In addition, Revelation alludes to an honorific title for Jesus by calling him “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). Thus, hyssop plays a dual role both in the liberation of the children of Israel and delivering people from sin and death.

No matter what John conveys through his biblical allusions, we still have a problem. When Jesus says, “It is finished,” practical minded folks think it means “He is finished.” That is, Jesus is finished. These words inspire little confidence of faith that we need. Rather, they remind us of a thousand different ways to say: “He is history” or “He is done for.” Sometimes we speak of a victory over an opponent with words like, “We smoked them,” “We burned them,” or “He is finished.” To our ears, or the ears of many, when Jesus says, “It is finished,” we hear rather “I am finished.”

In his superb book, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, Richard John Neuhaus writes:

For one thing, it appears that he is finished. By any ordinary measure this is not completion, but poignant failure. It is death. It is the demolition of all those grand hopes he had aroused. He started out announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, and he ends up here. Some kingdom. Some king. The jeering crowds around the cross are having the last laugh. He talked so splendidly: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” What kingdom? What comfort? What inheritance? The time has come to face the fact: It is finished; it is over (Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, Basic Books, New York, 2000, p. 188).

While all that may be true from our human point of view, the Bible and John’s Gospel have a different blueprint of what being finished is all about. It is finished; but it is not over. Jesus’ apparent demise is simply a new beginning for God. “It is finished, but it is not over.” It is finished from John’s point of view means, “it is settled, decided, certain, complete, and incontestable” (*ibid*, p.



191). While it is true that the cross suggests that the end of Jesus' earthly life has arrived, what we cannot forget is that Jesus' heavenly reign now begins.

For John, "It is finished" simply means Jesus' work on earth is complete or perfect. Now God moves to the human project of working through the disciples, apostles, and the church to send a divine message of redeeming love to all humankind. And this may be the most important thing to say: From God's point of view the human project cannot fail because God has inserted himself into it via Jesus and the work he has finished or accomplished.

When Jesus says, "It is finished" he means that the work for which God sent him to complete is finished. Jesus could have said, "Mission accomplished!"

Yet, our work is before us, even as Jesus' work is behind him. We are in mission for Christ and this mission is the work that he has left us with. The choice is ever before us—mission for God's world or will we choose, like Frank Sinatra, "to do it our way." Someone told me that more and more people under the age of forty are making arrangements to be sure that their cell phone or tablet is buried with them. Some make plans to have their ear buds put in place and their favorite music playing as they go down into the ground. Is this what we have reduced our life's work to? Our possessions can grab a hold of us and take up a significant place in our lives. We can almost believe that we could take it with us. I am almost certain that this is not the abundant life to which Jesus referred.

Today is the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent. I would ask you to pray to God to reveal that thing that God wants you to finish by Easter. There may be a person that needs your forgiveness. You may need to take the first step. Pray about that.



There may be a deep and persistent grief gnawing at your being, a sense of loss that you cannot shake. Pray about that. Perhaps, you have never forgiven yourself a secret act that no one knows about. Pray to God about this and your Father in secret will forgive you.

Most of all pray that God reveals some great unfinished work. God placed us where we are because God can use each of us. Pray for guidance that God may find you your place of service. Pray now for God to give us all abundant life. Amen.

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