

The Sixth Word  
“It is finished.” -John 19:30

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A Good Friday Sermon by:  
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I.

Believe it or not, I was thinking of you on a recent trip to Israel/Palestine. On a chilly day of snow and sleet in Jerusalem, I took shelter inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and huddled with Christian pilgrims from India, Mexico, Russia, Korea, and other countries. By tradition, the church was built on the site of the crucifixion, known as Golgotha, the place of the skull, or as Calvary. It also contains the sepulcher itself, the place where, tradition tells us, Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

Initially, I thought it strange that both Golgotha and the tomb were located within the same church. Then I learned that the place of execution would have stood in the midst tombs, just outside the city limits, so it is appropriate that both sites are venerated within the same building. And not only appropriate, but also beautiful. That one church houses both of these sites suggests that these two events, crucifixion and empty tomb, cannot be separated one from the other. The crucified one is the risen one. The risen one is the crucified one.

As I stood at the altar of Calvary, subsumed within a marvelous sea of humanity, a cacophony of languages, and a meteor-shower of camera flashes, I thought on the sixth word, and I imagined forward to this ecumenical gathering at First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs on Good Friday, 2008.

“It is finished.” This is the 6<sup>th</sup> of the last words of Christ. This phrase, while stark, presses us to wonder, first of all, to what does the word “it” refer, and secondly, in what sense is that it “finished”? These are the questions I want to explore with you for the next several minutes.

Recently, I heard an interview with the late philosopher and theologian John O’Donahue, who describes the riches of Celtic spirituality. Discussing the role of beauty in the spiritual life, he said (and I’m paraphrasing, I hope accurately), “What I love about Christianity and

what I think is distinctive about the Christian faith is its emphasis on intimacy.” What I heard O’Donahue saying is that the goal of the Christian path is intimacy with God. The destination of the Christian pilgrim, he says, is a sense of “belonging, of being seen, of coming home.

I think much of the Christian tradition agrees with O’Donahue, even the Gospel of John itself. Chapter 1, verse 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And from the same chapter, verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

“The Word became flesh and came to live among us,” is a statement of God’s decisive act in pursuit of intimacy with humanity. It is the act called Incarnation. This act of incarnation in pursuit of intimacy was “in the beginning.” Intimacy was the very purpose of creation. And God’s desire for intimacy endured humanity’s rejection of God’s gift of closeness. Humans, instead, saw themselves as something separate from God, capable of knowledge and action apart from God, and original intimacy was placed in jeopardy by the tempting illusion of human independence.

## II.

As I stood, looking at the altar at the place called Calvary, absorbed within a crowd of kindred in faith, and invoking in my heart the communion that we share as gathered body today, I heard the words, “It is finished,” and the “it” in the phrase seemed to me to God’s loving act, through Christ, to reestablish that primal intimacy between humanity and God, and, inseparably, the act of reestablishing intimacy between humans. After all, when pressed to answer what is the greatest commandment, Jesus, like all preachers, couldn’t help but give two answers, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, AND, love your neighbor as yourself.” Perhaps unwittingly, he sneaks in a third answer, that is, love of self. Both love of God and love of self are presumed in the love of neighbor.

Hanging on the cross, having submitted himself to his divine purpose, and having been subjected to worldly violence, Jesus proclaims “it is finished,” that is, his work in Gode has restored the primal intimacy between God and humanity, and, accordingly, between human and human. But shall we limit the work Jesus accomplishes to his death on

the cross? No. The work accomplished on the cross is the culmination of his life work and should not be separated from it.

This is one of the flaws in Mel Gibson's movie, the Passion of the Christ, which so captured our attention few years ago and continues to dominate our imagination at this time of year. The filmmaker gives almost no indication why this man is being put to death and so the brutality is disconnected from the life that provoked it. Karl Barth, commenting on the Apostle's Creed, defines the phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate" as referring to Jesus' worldly existence in its totality. His life work was to reestablish intimacy between humans and God. Water into wine was a sign of God's abundant life. Multiplied loaves revealed the sufficiency God intends for humanity. Eyes blind from birth made to see restore an original vision of God's power to grant true wisdom, the wisdom of humanity's intimate dependency upon God.

It is finished. What is finished? The life work of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, whose final work, whose culminating act, was to empty himself and thereby to complete or finish the work of re-forging the broken relationship between God and humanity. In doing so, he reveals the illusion of our separateness from God. No, we are not God. God remains God and we remain humans, but human insistence that we can and should assert ourselves as independent from God's love and grace is now finished.

### III.

Stanley Hauerwas, quoting Richard Neuhaus, writes, "Jesus' work is finished, but not over." That is, the work of Jesus reestablishes the possibility of intimacy with God and with each other, but the work of the church is to realize it. All too often, we, the church, forget that the most important work is finished and that it is our joy to receive and realize. It's time to remember: "Jesus' work is finished, but not over."

We hang our heads and wring our hands, overwhelmed by the problems of the world. We allow stress to rule our lives and convince ourselves that one more good act will satisfy. If only I could make a little more money. If only I could be more competent. If only... If only... It's time to remember: "Jesus' work is finished, but not over."

We promote ourselves into the position of deciding who shall be the rightful heirs of the Way of Jesus. We come up with excuses why poor people, people of color, gay people, women, uneducated people should

be less worthy of intimacy with God exactly as God finds them. It's time to remember: "Jesus' work is finished, but not over."

We lose faith in the power of Jesus' non-violent witness. We pretend that it only worked for him that one time. He was the Son of God, after all, we offer as an excuse to ourselves. Instead, we wage preemptive war and rattle our swords to the tune of \$12 billion dollars per month. It's time to remember: "Jesus' work is finished, but not over."

We exempt ourselves from the duties of neighborliness. We dismiss our homeless neighbor as a nuisance, our conservative neighbor as a moral zealot, our liberal neighbor as a dreamer, and our immigrant neighbor as a felon. We ignore the mandate of the prophets to remember the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in our midst, and we overlook the gospel mandates to love neighbor and enemy. Let us never forget: "Jesus' work is finished, but not over."

We lost the gift of intimacy with God long ago.  
And it's been so long, the loss seems to be part of our very make-up,  
embedded in our bones,  
lodged in our skulls.  
But stand with me for a moment at Calvary,  
Together with those from across the world seeking to restore the gift.  
Huddled together to protect from the cold,  
we experience a taste of haphazard intimacy.  
Looking upon that altar,  
we remember again that we need each other,  
rely upon each other,  
depend upon other humans,  
not only because we provide each other with our basic daily needs,  
but because a man on a cross once uttered "It is finished,"  
reminding us that our intimacy with each other  
is rooted in our intimacy with God  
and that the promise of intimacy with God is more profound,  
more primal,  
and more important than our perceived separation.

It is finished... receive it.  
It is finished... realize it.  
It is finished... thanks be to God.

Please join me in prayer... (silence)

Let us pray:  
God, on this day of disorientation,  
this Good Friday that is anything but good,  
we are perplexed to the point of defeat.

If “it is finished,” then why does there seem to be so much work left to do?

Why do we persist in our divisive ways?

Why do we claim to own you even as we fall far short of your glory?

Grant us the patience and the perception to receive your finished work, a life of risk and healing and vulnerability, even to death on a cross.

If the Son of Man is to be lifted up, why must it be on a cross, that others may see and laugh and mock?

Grant us humility to belong to the one who emptied himself on behalf of the world, that we might not respond with pride or vengeance, but with steadfast love and faithfulness, loving our neighbor and enemy alike and believing the power of your Holy Spirit sent among us and among all people.

God of grace, even as we long to see and to know you face-to-face, let us begin with those closest to us. Allow us to truly see the face of the other, with its scars and furrowed brow equally with dimples and bright eyes. Perhaps, O Lover of People, in learning to love one another, we’ll look into eyes and see glimpses of your light, glimpses of *the* light of the world, which shines even now. Amen.