

The Fifth Word

Reflection given by The Rev. Dcn. Joshua Saxe
Grace Episcopal Church
New York, NY
Good Friday, 2011

When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said “I thirst”.

As some of you know, before I came to New York to pursue studies necessary for ordained ministry, I worked in a sports medicine clinic as an athletic trainer. For those of you unfamiliar with the work of an athletic trainer, the simplest explanation is that they are individuals who traditionally works with and cares for the physically active population, particularly those involved in competitive sports or physically demanding occupations.

Though in my experience this simple definition, though correct, doesn't really do the profession much justice. Often times in conversation with others the response is “Oh, that's like a personal trainer!” Well, it could be if we were in a universe where a nurse is the same thing as a physician, or a junior high school hall monitor is the same thing as a police officer. But, we are not in that universe. That is not to say a personal trainer is less important; far from it. They have much to offer the realm of sports medicine, but to say, “Oh, that's like a personal trainer!” to an *athletic trainer* sometimes elicits a mild sigh of frustration.

But that definition is easier to articulate to curious minds than regurgitating what our first instructors told athletic training students the first day of college when they said: athletic training involves and entails knowing and understanding the pathology of injuries and illnesses, injury prevention, acute care of injuries and illnesses, orthopedic examination and assessment, therapeutic modalities, conditioning and rehabilitative exercises, pharmacology and psychosocial intervention and referral, nutritional concerns, and healthcare administration.

Who in the world would really want to hear that definition? However, it does more justice than my abbreviated explanation, and shows that there was a lot of stuff that needed to be crammed into the head of a student over four years of college! But regardless of all the information that had been imparted upon us athletic training students, there were some lessons that would become engrained in our minds over those years.

One lesson that was stressed most often - and I mean almost daily - was the importance of always maintaining adequate hydration when physically active. And it's a good lesson; one that us first year athletic training students would come to know all too well. One of my assignments as a student was with the football team, and as students, we had the inglorious job of, as our supervisor put it, hydration specialists; aka water boys or water girls as some of the haughtier, puffed up football players would say. It was all that we could do, with barely a year of school under our belts we hadn't built the trust of our superiors to care for Division I athletes. And so day in and day out during football practice the students would hear the cries of exhausted football players shouting out at the top of their lungs, “Water! I need water!”

Their cries were a response to the physical condition that is thirst; that universal symptom where our bodies tell us that we are in need of something. In the case of those athletes it was water in little green Gatorade cups they would reach for to provide respite at the completion of a grueling, high intensity drill; water they would yearn for and sought out to quench their intense thirst, sat out by us athletic training students.

With at least a hundred bodies to appease in a few short minutes between drills it never seemed like we could keep up with the high demand, and so the shouts of “water!” would echo throughout the stadium.

And now, turning our attention to Jesus upon the cross, we hear him utter the simple phrase “I thirst”. These words were no doubt spoken after he had been nailed to the cross for some time, most likely several hours after being spat on, beaten, bruised, and bloodied. And here he is now, naked, with the sun mercilessly beating down on his bare skin. We have listened and know that Jesus had sensed that all which was going to take place had happened, that “all was now finished,” we hear the Gospel writer say, but prior to Jesus verbalizing the writers thoughts he makes it known that he is thirsty.

It is difficult to imagine that the same Jesus who proclaimed “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink”; and who said “Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” and who offered a Samaritan woman at the well “living water”, now speaks out as he is dying, “I thirst.” What could Jesus, the “well of life” have been “thirsting” for?

There seem to be two prevailing opinions regarding Jesus’ statement. On the most basic level, the human level, Jesus is physically thirsty. To deny that Jesus wasn’t physically thirsty is to deny his full humanity. He is in pain, not only from his earlier beating at the hands of soldiers and nails through his hands and feet, but also from excessive dehydration, which in and of itself can be agonizing to go through. At the very least, dehydration can lead to fatigue or weakness, headaches, nausea, and muscle cramps. Severe dehydration is a serious medical emergency, and if left untreated, can lead to breathing problems, chest pain, or painful spasm of the muscles. Jesus was bleeding to death and had to have been on the brink of exhaustion from the heat of the afternoon sun. He was in excruciating pain, but still in control; and though on the verge of death he says, with poise and dignity, “I am thirsty”.

And because of this very real suffering Jesus asks for relief; and this relief would come not from the sour wine that was extended to him on a branch, but God’s cup, which for Jesus meant death¹. His physical thirst then becomes a divine thirst.

Just the night before on the Mount of Olives, with his betrayal imminent, Jesus knew what drinking God’s cup entailed for him, and what I could only imagine as a moment of trepidation on his part for the final act of his self-giving ministry, he got down on his knees and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me!” But after what I imagine is a long pause he concludes, “Yet, not my will but yours be done.” And so, hanging on the cross, he thirsts for and is ready to embrace God’s cup; the cup that means the end of his bodily suffering.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross Shattered Christ: Reflections on the Seven Last Words*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 76.

This is not to say that Jesus' desire upon uttering these words were solely for an end to his suffering; far from it. That would seem like Jesus thinking about himself, and we know he wasn't one to ever put himself first. Just look at the place in time where he mentions *his* thirst! It comes after he has asked God to forgive those who were carrying out his sentence; it comes after telling one of the criminals he was going to be with Jesus in paradise; and it comes after making sure his mother and the beloved disciple were going to care for each other.

Jesus knew what his death would bring. He knew his death would do more than all his teaching and all his miracles combined. He knew that giving his life would be the ultimate gift for the world, because it meant that the world would be redeemed by such a sacrifice. His thirst was for us, in this world. And Jesus' giving up of himself by drinking His cup showed the world that God thirsts for us, too. That's why God sent His only Son, so that He could live among us and make God's love known to all His children.

God so desperately wanted to have a deeper relationship with us and has done so through Christ. In Christ's humanness, he could reveal the fullness of God's love in ways that had never been thought possible. He reveals God's love in all sorts of ways that develop from the shared human experience of life and death. And in his death, Jesus gave up what human beings hold most dear – life – and he gave it up because he chose to do so in love and in obedience to the Father so that we might become heirs of God's kingdom².

What about our thirst? Certainly, God wants us, desires us to thirst! He wants us to long for this Kingdom which has been made available to us through Christ's great sacrifice 2000 years ago. As the psalmist cried out, "My soul thirsts for the Living God", so too should our cries be, and our thirst for God must be as physical as Christ's thirst had been while he was on the cross. I say this because God's redeeming work did not end that Friday afternoon, it had just begun. It started with Christ and with God's help, it continues with each and every one of us.

When Jesus prayed to God before he was handed over, he prayed for his disciples and asked his Heavenly Father to "sanctify them in the truth, which is God's Word." He continues, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." So as long as Christians are of this world we must proclaim Christ, remembering that it is the Crucified Christ who is the living water that leads to eternal life. And in our re-remembering of Christ we become members of His Body, an extension of his saving grace that can lead to the redemption of this broken world, for "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

As the athlete thirsts for water from little green cups in their continual physically demanding lifestyles, so the Christian thirsts for water. But the water that we thirst for is the water that is from the well of life and the Cup of Salvation. We thirst for one another because we know that we are stronger as Christ's body; and as we go forth as members of Christ's body we must proclaim our crucified Lord so that the world may know that it has been redeemed and that this redemption is as real as the water that assures us of our continued existence; that redemption is found in the body and blood of our Lord³. Blood poured out on the cross this day so that our cups will never run dry.

² The New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Volume IX; *John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 837.

³ Hauerwas, 78.