

## **“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”**

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The Seventh Word from the Cross  
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“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And Jesus breathed his last. A paradox to the very end of his time on earth. The moment that I had this thought, I initially rebuked myself saying “Come on Ted, the use of paradox here is too cliché or ubiquitous.” It seems like we are always referring to Jesus and so many Biblical events and situations as being a paradox or an irony. But I was thoroughly reassured about my reaction when I consulted my handy dictionary and read the second entry under paradox: “One exhibiting inexplicable aspects.” Doesn’t that actually speak volumes about our Lord and Savior? HE IS INEXPLICABLE. Here he is, about to breath his last breath and he cries loud and clear “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus is fully composed and exerting unbelievable self-control. Bringing remarkable dignity to his most painful death.

Nearing the end of his long hours on the cross. Suffering through what is reportedly a most excruciating form of capital punishment, and Jesus remains in utter control while expressing these trusting and intimate final words. We, mere humans, can only find this inexplicable. Jesus was a true human paradox. Now Luke has very intentionally helped us to see the person of Jesus in his moment of death in the way that he has presented the narrative of the crucifixion to us. Unlike the final words in the gospels of John and Matthew, Luke has chosen to focus on Jesus’ presence on the cross as the Savior, rather than giving some emphasis to activities around Jesus on the cross. In presenting Jesus in such a calm and collected manner, I feel that I have a greater ability to really understand his having come as our Savior and the Lord of God’s kingdom. In Matthew’s Gospel, I find the anguish that comes through Jesus in his concern about being forsaken by his Father to be distracting in some manner. In a similar way, in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ discomfort in thirsting pulls me away from his real presence for us. Luke, in a helpful way for me, chose not to include the confusion of the people at the cross about whether Jesus was crying out for the prophet Elijah. I think that Luke recognizes and allows us to focus on how Jesus is truly and divinely different from other prophets. I embrace the emotional aspects of what Jesus experienced, as narrated by other evangelists, but the serenity of Luke’s final scene is ultimately reassuring to me. Also, as we heard earlier, Jesus offers his forgiveness to everyone and allows that the criminal hanging with him who has confessed his faith will join Jesus in Paradise this very day. This serves to further differentiate true believers from the other criminal who, like the many leaders can only mock Jesus at this time demonstrating just how unable they are to receive the forgiveness that Jesus gives them. Then he calmly speaks his last words “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” A deeply trusting and intimate final statement.

Let’s consider where Jesus has turned for these last words and what he has done with them. Before Jesus came to earth, Jewish mothers would put their children to bed having them say a prayer that drew from the 5<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 31 “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” A simple Jewish child’s prayer. One that Jesus himself likely heard from his own mother Mary. They would send up their prayer of trust in God much as I imagine many of us learned to when we were young and perhaps prayed at night “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep.” Simple. Expressing our trust in God. Jesus doesn’t die aiming to leave us with any complex theological observation. Lord knows he could have in light of his vast knowledge of Scripture and tradition and teaching. He simply takes a longstanding child’s prayer of trust and enhances it with the intimacy of his relationship with his Father. “Father, into your hands I

commend my spirit.” Jesus draws on a broadly used child’s prayer from the psalms and makes it personal as he hands his own spirit over to his Father. Simple, trusting, and intimate. Oh that we might maintain our childlike faith through our years.

As I reflected on Jesus’ last words at his own death, it made me think of the period in the late 1990’s when my own father and father-in-law died within a year or so of one another. Looking back, I believe that I was able to confront the reality of these deaths because of the serene trusting way that Jesus spoke his last words. They both died of cancer. Neither one of them were evident men of faith. Indeed, on more than one occasion I recall my father taking the Lord’s name in vain. My mother and mother-in-law helped to nurture my faith and that of my wife. But as our fathers stared at death they were calmly dignified. This, in turn, allowed our families to deal with the reality of their deaths in helpful ways. My father-in-law died first after numerous rounds of chemotherapy. He was at home in his own bed as the time approached. All three of his grown children were at his bedside as well as a healthy number of grandchildren and us in-laws. After he calmly breathed his last, we prayed about his death to begin our grieving. It was a blessing to be together like that.

In a similar manner, my own father, without going into the details of his own trials and tribulations with chemo and radiation therapy, asked me to join him for a weekend about a month before he died. He chose to walk his last miles without much accompaniment in the hospitals and clinics other than my step-mother and we had been talking about the best time for a visit. He called and said the time was right. It was a brilliant and cold October weekend on Mt. Desert Island where he had retired to many years ago. The two of us drove around the island stopping in various places with beautiful views of God’s creation. The sea, rocks, mountains, various kinds of wildlife. All along we simply talked about many different matters of life. Really giving thanks for what we had received and, in a muted way, expressing our hopes for the future. He died about a month later.

The dignity that these two fellows demonstrated in the face of death was quite remarkable. Again, they didn’t express their feelings in terms of Christological or existential statements nor did they likely say “father, into your hands I commend my spirit” when they breathed their last. But they did appear to offer thanks for their lives and they were models of simple human dignity for those of us, family and friends, who continue forward in our journeys. I find it meaningful in some sort of paradoxical way that these two fathers wanted their ashes to be spread in beautiful natural places. One in the mountains and the other on the sea.

This meaning of nature for them returns me to Jesus on the cross right now. There was apparently an eclipse at the time of Jesus’ death. God’s natural creation at work around Jesus then and all of us now. I know I can find myself thinking about Jesus’ death in a dualistic way. He dies, leaves earth, and goes to some abstract heaven. I believe this is dangerous as it can incline me to disregard the living Spirit of God and Christ that animates all of God’s creation here and now.

Today happens to be Earth Day in addition to our significant holy day. Six years ago, I offered my first ever sermon in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. I was part of a group leading worship in the chapel. We had some real fun creating the service. I was thankful that my “twenty something classmates” were as excited as I was about our focus on God’s creation with current concern about our role as stewards of this creation. As a high school student in suburban Philadelphia in 1970 we had a pretty good size celebration of that first Earth Day in my school community. Back then, I did not fully appreciate the impact of those first color photographs of our delicate planet taken by humans orbiting in outer space. I imagine you likely know the picture I am referring to. The

astronauts in the Apollo space program took it while orbiting earth. It is a simple profile of planet earth from outer space. Our beautiful planet looks remarkably small and fragile. It sparked real concerns about our human stewardship of this God given gift. Indeed the environmental movement really accelerated with this wake up call. The picture was featured on the cover of the first Whole Earth Catalog in the fall of 1968.

Being at Union preparing our worship service, unfettered by particular denominational polity matters, we were encouraged to and used multimedia and projected images of the earth on a screen behind the lectern and played as part of the service Louis Armstrong's great rendition of "What A Wonderful World." In which Satchmo sings "I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night." He really captured a sense of God's marvelous order. Of atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexities of living creatures. Jesus on the cross saying his last words "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" isn't going off to some abstract place. He is right here among us now. Urging us in ways that we must discover to be more faithful stewards of God's creation.

On Monday of this week, I received an unsolicited e mail that invited me to "Celebrate Earth Day at Duane Reade." The highlighted items through which I presumably might celebrate Earth Day by a little spending spree at my local Duane Reade were: 75% Tree Free Bath Tissue, Green Glass Cleaner and a Bamboo Cutting Board. Now I didn't have the time to examine just how these products are helping the environment but I certainly am suspicious of the claims to say the least. I have the keen sense that we have become alarmingly detached from nature when we face marketing and promotional pitches like this. Adding to the affront of the Duane Reade marketing ploy on Monday, was the anniversary on Wednesday of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion and subsequent catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf. I believe this takes us to another extreme, that of our human complicity in allowing such devastation to occur in God's creation. Public and private human actions certainly contributed in a significant way to allowing this accident to happen. These sparks to my critical consciousness compelled me toward today and placing myself at the foot of the cross. In light of these couple of matters, I know that I need to not so much celebrate Earth Day as honor it here on Good Friday reflecting on our Savior's last words and trying to understand how we might become better stewards of this glorious creation that we are part of. I know that the pain of the cross will be succeeded by the glory of the resurrection but I need to look closely within my soul at this time to try to find some sense of the inexplicable nature of Jesus that will lead me toward fulfilling my responsibility to be a better steward of God's creation. I also understand that, while I must place my total trust in my Lord and Savior, it is my human agency and that of all of us that commands us to work together as the body of Christ to address our stake in what is going on in the world around us.

As Jesus says "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" I pray that we will be stirred and awakened to participate fully as good stewards of God's creation and Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation. Our Savior prayed in quiet natural places and taught us to respect all living creatures and the whole of God's creation. Let us try to honor his loving examples in our community of Christ today.

AMEN