THAT’S ALL FOLKS!

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
Good Friday + March 29, 2013

The Seven Last Words of Christ: The Seventh Word

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

Soren Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish philosopher who is often called “the father of Existentialism.” He was also a Christian, and thus a frequent hearer and occasional critic of church sermons. At one point he wrote of his experience in the pew:

When a clergyman has luckily reached the third point of his sermon and already is so far along in it that one who knows the proportions of clerical elocution ventures with a good deal of security to assume that he is about to hum and say Amen – then it may be anguishing when he, instead of pronouncing the significant Amen, becomes gossipy, and adds one period after another, while the knowing hearer may say that essentially the sermon is over and essentially the Amen has been said. This is an example of accidental length, recognizable by the fact that it begins where, essentially viewed, the Amen should have been said. (from On Authority and Revelation)

Kierkegaard then goes on to compare the lengthy, “accidental” portions of sermons to an experience that perhaps you know. Imagine this: You host a dinner party. The evening advances, the food is eaten, and the conversation begins to wane. You send all the polite non-verbal cues to your guests that it’s time to go, but they are deaf to the signals. You stand up and stretch. You clear the table. You start the dishwasher. You do all but come downstairs in your pajamas. The party is finished. The significant Amen has been said, but there sit the guests for another hour. This, said Kierkegaard, is like the sermon which begins where the Amen should be said. Both the dinner party and the sermon provide examples of accidental length, the sign of which is the negative category, beginning when one should stop.

We come finally to the seventh and last word that Jesus spoke from the cross during the crucifixion. For some of you, what follows will be the seventh sermon you’ve heard today. You’ve been here for nearly three hours. If you suspect that we are now entering Kierkegaard’s negative zone of accidental length – of beginning where one should stop – you would be in excellent company. In fact, the Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and John would all concur that the significant Amen has already been said. For Matthew and Mark, the first, and last, and only utterance from the cross was what we call the fourth word, the cry of dereliction, a quote from Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” True, John attested that Jesus had more to say during the long ordeal of crucifixion, but according to his Gospel, the last words on the lips of the dying Jesus were what we call the sixth word, “It is finished.”

I don’t mean to be irreverent here, but in preparing this sermon on the seventh word, I’ve been recalling the many happy hours of quality Saturday morning cartoons that I watched as a child. At the end of each cartoon, Porky Pig would burst through the skin of a drum and declare, “That’s all folks!” The cartoon was finished. Forgive me; you’ve never heard Porky Pig mentioned in a Good Friday sermon before, and if you are lucky, you never will again. The image is simply where the sixth word from the cross leaves us. It is time to turn off the television and go. It is finished.
Seriously, once you’ve declared it is finished, what more can be said? Pressing on further is to be like the school teacher who tries to work a final problem on the chalkboard or the smart board or whatever board they are using these days during the last waning minutes of an already long class. Do you remember being in school when the minute hand of the old clock on the wall blessedly crossed the Roman-numeral eleven, so that one could venture with a good deal of security to assume that the teacher was about to hum and say, “class dismissed?” As students we would begin closing our books, putting away our pencils, and doing nothing other than waiting for the bell to ring. We were finished. Oh, the anguish, then when an overly zealous teacher would demand that we unpack our things and pay attention until the bell actually rung.

On Good Friday it’s as if the Gospel writer Luke is telling us to unpack our things and pay attention until the bell rings. Luke alone records the final words of Jesus to have been these, at the very moment of his death: Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. What vital meaning might we find in these words that hasn’t already been expressed? Many commentators often sketch an imaginative scene for us. They remind us that in speaking the seventh word, Jesus was quoting a Psalm, as he did when he spoke the fourth word. According to Luke, what Jesus chose to say for his final words was a direct quote from Psalm 31:5. Commentators go on to suggest that Psalm 31:5 – Into thy hands I commit my spirit – was a universal bedtime prayer that every Jewish mother would have taught her children to recite before going to sleep. What is more, at 3:00 in the afternoon, precisely when Jesus died, it was time for evening prayers to begin at the Temple. The sound of the ram’s horn trumpet – the shofar – would have easily carried to Golgotha, just outside the city walls. Thus, as the musical summons to evening prayer reached Jesus’ ears, he recalled the bedtime Psalm verse his mother taught him, and he died in peace. Says one commentator (William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, p. 288), Jesus made it even more lovely for he began it with the word, Father. Even on the cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father’s arms.

Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit. I don’t doubt the deep truth of what the interpreters of Jesus’ final words are trying to convey. Nor do I think that they are completely off the mark of what Luke wanted us to hear. What strikes me as odd, however, if not misguided altogether is the effort to describe the scene as “lovely,” and “peaceful.” Personally, I struggle with the notion that Jesus, having been awake all the previous night, arrested and unjustly tried, beaten and mocked, flogged and crucified, would be experiencing his final moment as lovely and peaceful. With his flayed-open back rubbing against the splinterly wood of the cross, with nails the size of railroad spikes hammered through his wrists and ankles, it strains the imagination to suggest that Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father’s arms.

What is more, through the Gospel writers don’t generally agree on what Jesus’ final words were, Matthew, Mark, and Luke concur that he shouted them out with a loud voice. Mark goes even further to challenge the notion of a peaceful passing. The Greek verb he chose to describe how Jesus spoke his final word is better translated to scream than to cry out. The Gospels also variously attest to an earthquake, the rending of the Temple veil, and darkness descending over the whole land. Say what you will about these signs and wonders, none of them suggest peace and tranquility. The darkness is death itself, that which seeks to annihilate Jesus and all life. It is the last enemy to be destroyed. We might do well to note that among the Psalms Jesus chose to recite from the cross, the two we’ve mentioned – Psalms 22 and 31 – cast the Psalmist in the presence of his enemies. The Psalmist is crying out, screaming out for vindication against his enemies. Likewise, Luke sounds a note of defiance in Jesus’ final words. Luke depicts Jesus as wanting all within ear shot to know that his enemies have not succeeded in separating him from the love of God. What’s the clue? The clue is the addition of the word Father, which does not appear in the Psalm verse. Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit, is what Jesus said in these
last of his last words. *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,* is what Jesus said in the first of his last words.

I am not a devout follower of college basketball, but this year Holy Week does fall in the heat of March madness. Thus I recall the witness of Jim Valvano. Thirty years ago this month, Valvano was the coach of the North Carolina State “Wolfpack,” who went to the big dance and won it all. Ten years later, Valvano was riddled with bone cancer and had only two months to live. But at an anniversary reunion for the victorious team, he stood before a packed arena and declared, “Cancer can take away all my physical abilities, but it cannot touch my mind. *It cannot touch my heart. And it cannot touch my soul. These three things are going to carry on forever.*” Valvano was defiant in the face of his enemy. In his declaration I hear echoes of how Luke recorded the last words of Jesus. It’s as if Jesus were saying to the powers of darkness doing their worst: *I have one more thing to say before I breathe my last. You can beat me, mock me, whip me, spit on me, even crucify me. You can incite people to do these evil deeds. But you cannot touch my love for them; for they know not what they do. And you cannot touch my love for God, and God’s love for me. God’s love carries on forever. Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.*

Are these merely brave words, flung in the face of death before it overwhelms us with its inevitability? I remember the death of my maternal grandmother many years ago. She was 88 at the time, living independently, and sharp as a tack. Over that summer a series of small strokes required a move to a nursing home, which confused her and began a downward spiral. At one point in her mental digression she lamented that when she tried to concentrate, all she saw was “a big black hole.” By October a larger stroke rendered her essentially comatose, and she languished in the hospital bed of a stroke unit for weeks on end. She was finished, and it seemed like her remaining days were turning into what Kierkegaard would call, “accidental length.” It was awful. It dragged on and on, day after day, night after night. My mother kept vigil, and was there one night in late November when it seemed like the “significant Amen” was about to be said. She remembers that my grandmother’s eyes were open, and the two were looking at each other. Then my grandmother’s gaze seemed to focus beyond my mother. She raised her head, which is something she hadn’t done for over a month, and her face suddenly lit up with a wonderful smile. She eased her head back to the pillow, and she breathed her last. I wonder what she saw. I wonder whom she saw. I pray that when she breathed her last she saw what and whom Jesus saw when he breathed his last, saying, “*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.*”

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitation of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen. *(John Donne, 1572-1631)*