

“CROSS WORDS: V – ‘I THIRST’”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Fourth Sunday of Lent

Psalm 42:1-5

John 19:16b-29

Just about every day this week, at some point, I’ve gone outside to get some fresh air and sunshine. This “social distancing” stuff is hard for all of us, and it’s particularly hard, if you don’t mind me saying so, when you live alone. The walls tend to close in on you, the news gets overwhelming, and sometimes you just need a break. So that’s why I go outside a little bit every day.

Well, the other day I took the opportunity to complete a task I’d meant to do for a while. While sorting through things in anticipation of moving in a few months, I had gone through all of my DVDs – you know, movies and tv shows and such. I can’t remember the last time I looked at one, because everything’s available through the TV or other streaming devices right now. I had seen somewhere that before you decide to take them to Goodwill or some other place like that, that you ought to donate them to nursing homes or assisted living centers.

Great idea, I thought! I gave Gretchen O’Neal a call because she’s up at Calvert Manor, and she said they’d love to have them. So a few days ago, when the walls were starting to cave in on me, I got in the car and drove over to Calvert to deliver them. Since Calvert Manor is closed to visitors right now, Gretchen came out front to get them from me. I’m hoping they’ll bring a little joy to their residents, who right now, like so many others, are restricted from seeing their loved ones in person.

On my ride to and from Calvert, I saw some amazing things – and not necessarily good amazing. I drove by restaurant after restaurant with empty parking lots. I drove by sidewalks empty of people. I drove by homes with lots of cars in the driveway. But here’s what I noticed the most – every grocery store I drove by had totally full parking lots!

Right now, it seems people are afraid of running out of food and water. Even though we’re being told that there is no shortage of either, we’re ignoring that and going to the stores to stock our shelves. We’re afraid of being hungry. We’re afraid of being thirsty.

Well, dear friends, “thirst” is at the very heart of this morning’s Gospel lesson, in fact, it’s the centerpiece of Jesus’ fifth word from the cross. You heard the lesson that Mike read. They made Jesus carry the cross to Golgotha, nailed him to it and crucified him in between two criminals. They continually humiliated him, whether it was by nailing up words on the cross, or tearing his clothing to bits and casting lots for it. They taunted him and jeered at him, challenged him to be the Messiah he claimed to be, and save himself. Every moment was brutal, and each passing minute brought more pain and suffering, until we come to this moment, this word today, this word Jesus uttered as he neared the end, “I thirst.”

It is a word that most people utter or at least feel as their lives are ending. Sadly, I’ve been around people at the end of their lives to know that their mouths are dry. Sometimes they’re giving a few ice chips for relief, someone a straw filled with water, and sometimes a moistened sponge on the end of a stick is used to bring some relief on their lips. Being thirsty is a part of human dying.

Jesus was experiencing that – true humanity. He was fully divine, yes, but fully human as well, and he experiencing every horrible, painful moment just as we would. He was spared nothing. So in these final moments of his life, Jesus literally thirsted.

But there was more to his words as well. Adam Hamilton, in writing on this passage, points out that in the various gospel presentations of Jesus' passion and death, he is offered a drink three different times. First, in Matthew, as we heard last week, he was offered gall, and refused it. Let me tell you why: gall was something that might speed up the death, or possibly deaden the pain. Jesus refused it, he chose to bear the suffering.

Luke tells of a second time Jesus was offered drink, when the soldiers mocked him, offered him sour wine and mocked him, challenging him to save himself. Again, he refused.

And then this time, when wine is offered to him on a sponge at the end of a stick. Matthew, Mark and John all include this in their telling, albeit in different ways. John, in particular, wants us to know that Jesus says this word, "I thirst," to fulfill Hebrew scripture, from Psalm 69, which says, "For my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink." John wants us to know that Jesus indeed is the Messiah whose coming was foretold in scripture.

The bottom line for all of these moments is that Jesus chose to experience full humanity all along his journey. He could have made other choices, he could have found relief from suffering and humiliation, but he chose to experience what it means to be fully human.

The pain was brutal, the mocking and taunting humiliating, the sense of isolation and abandonment overwhelming, but he endured it all. And his thirst was real, very, very real. He thirsted yes, physically, as any other dying human would, but he also thirsted for God. He thirsted to be in God's presence, he thirsted for all of it to be over and to be wrapped in the arms of his Father. He was one of us, and in all of these ways, all along his journey to the cross and beyond, he showed us.

On pastor, in thinking on this, likens it to an experience a mission team from his church had. They went to Louisiana to help the clean-up after Hurricane Katrina, and he says, they could have stayed in a five-star hotel not far from the work sites, where they would have been very comfortable and cared for. Instead, they chose to sleep on the hard concrete floor of a church hall and take showers in a portable shower in a trailer. Why? He writes, "Because they wanted to identify with those people in their suffering. They freely chose discomfort for the sake of those they came to help. The discomfort was a part of the gift and part of the

expression of the love of God through them.” (Adam Hamilton, *Final Words*, “I Thirst,” p. 89)

So too, was Jesus’ discomfort part of the gift and part of the expression of God’s love for us. He suffered that we might know we are never alone in our suffering. He suffered that we might know that there is nothing we could experience that he hasn’t. He thirsted so that we might know when we are dying of thirst that he is with us, he has been there, and knows our pain.

Friends, we’re thirsting right now. All of us. Not for lack of water or food, no, we’re thirsting for normalcy, for life to be back the way it was not so long ago. We’re thirsting for peace and calm, in the midst of seemingly endless scary and bad news. We’re thirsting for strength and courage to carry us through this health crisis. We’re thirsting for companionship in the midst of mandated social distancing. We’re thirsting for stability in a world seemingly swirling in chaos.

In our prayers, we cry out, “I thirst.” And, if we’re honest, many of us have probably wondered if there’s an answer.

Let me remind you of an old story that Pastor James Moore shared. “A man was marooned on a desert island. The man prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and everyday he scanned the horizon for help, but no luck! No one knew he was there. No one was coming to save him. Exhausted, eventually he managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements and to store his few possessions. But then one day, the man went out searching for food. When he returned, he found his little hut in flames! The hut was blazing away, and the flames were rolling up into the sky! The worst had happened. Everything was lost. He was heartsick and discouraged. ‘God, how could you do this to me?’ he cried. Early the next day, however, the man was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. ‘How on earth did you find me? How did you know I was here?’ the man asked his rescuers. They said, ‘We saw your smoke signal.’” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, “Trust in God,” p. 26)

Dear friends, God sees our smoke signal. God sees the chaos of our world right now, God hears the aches of our hearts, sees the tears in our eyes, feels the fears that cause us to tremble. He knows we’re thirsty, and we need him more than ever.

He knows, because in Christ, he's been here, walked where we walk, suffered as we suffer, thirsted as we now thirst. Hear these words of assurance from the prophet Isaiah: "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them. I the God of Israel will not forsake them." (Isaiah 41:17)

Indeed God will answer and will not forsake us in our time of thirst. Thanks be to God!

Let me finish with one more thing. This passage today ends with someone lifting up a stick to Jesus' mouth, a stick on which there is a piece of sponge soaked with wine. We don't know who that someone is, but they did it to bring him relief in the midst of his suffering.

Friends, a lot of people are suffering right now, and I believe God is calling us to be the ones who reach up and help relieve their pain. I know many of you are already doing that. How do I know that? Because I've been the recipient of some of that help – through your phone calls to me, your emails, your Facebook posts.

I've been touched by those of you who have offered to help get groceries and supplies for those who are homebound. I know some of you are sending cards and notes to other church members. I know others of you stand ready to help with financial assistance if it's needed.

In all those ways and more, we help quench the thirst of those who are struggling right now. So I pray that we will continue to look for ways to do that. While all around us seems out of control right now, we know that it's not – that God is in control, that God is in the midst of us, and all will yet be well. We have a Savior who knows our pain, who embraced it fully in his time on this earth, and who walks with us every step of our journey.

So, if you find yourself thirsting right now, do not be afraid, God is with you. Knowing that, may all of us, by the power of his Holy Spirit, reach out and care for others who are thirsty this day and all the days ahead. May it be so. Amen.

