

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Good Friday Tenebrae Service  
Friday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon:** The Seven Last Words of Jesus from the Cross<sup>1</sup>

**Texts:** Luke 23:34, 43; John 19:26-28; Matt. 27:46; John 19:30;  
Luke 23:46

**Focus:** With his dying words, Jesus spoke blessing, forgiveness, complaint, and comfort on behalf of all people.

**Function:** That they would believe in the forgiveness won for us by Jesus' death on the cross.

**Structure:** Text-Application

**Locus:** "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil... with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death..." (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

**The First Word: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).<sup>2</sup>**

"Father, forgive..." The first words Jesus spoke from the cross were directed to God the Father, as Will Willimon points out in his meditation on the Seven Last Words: "With all the possible words of recrimination, condemnation, and accusation, the first thing Jesus says is, 'Father, forgive.' Earlier he commanded us to forgive our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We thought he meant that as a metaphor."<sup>3</sup> But forgiveness is *not* a metaphor, or even a feeling. It is the blood and guts reality of the cross of Christ. For Jesus it is a determined, dying act.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that none of us really understands why we do the things we do. As Will Willimon writes, "I've spent most of my life trying to figure out what I'm doing.... It's a fact,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a major revision of past versions of these meditations.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Willimon, *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), Kindle ed.

not an excuse. Most of our malice is exercised without aforethought.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as the apostle Paul writes in Romans 7: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:15, 19). We know not what we do. We cannot comprehend the full impact of our words and actions on other people. And neither can the people who hurt and harm us.

“Father, forgive...” Jesus prayed these words as the priests and passersby mocked him, as the criminals “railed at him” (23:39), as the Roman soldiers gambled for his clothes. “While they pronounced him guilty, he maintained their innocence.”<sup>5</sup> From the Greek grammar we surmise that Jesus said this not once, but repeatedly, over and over again.<sup>6</sup> “Father, forgive them. Father, forgive!” And what is truly remarkable about this prayer is that Jesus prayed it without any apology from his persecutors or accusers. Many of us are willing to formally forgive someone—“as a Christian”—if they first make a big show that they are sorry and do whatever form of penance we impose upon them. We want the people who wrong us to squirm a little before we absolve them. After all, they need to learn their lesson, don’t they?

But Jesus didn’t wait for his enemies to get their act together. Nor did we wait for us to repent. “Here, from the cross, is preemptive forgiveness” writes Willimon. “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:7-8). Jesus prayed and died *for you!*

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<sup>4</sup> Willimon, *Thank God It’s Friday*, Kindle ed.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “In the Name of Law and Order,” in *Home by Another Way* (Lanham, Maryland: Cowley Publications, 1999), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Rather than a simple past tense (aorist) verb (*eipen*), Luke employs the imperfect verb form (*elegen*), indicating repeated or habitual action.

That is why we Christians are called to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). We must forgive others in the same way that Christ forgave us. And how did Jesus forgive you your sins? Fully, freely, and without any strings attached! And that is how we must forgive others too: “as God in Christ forgave you.” So close your eyes, think of your offenders—and your offenses—and pray, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And Father, forgive us too.

**The Second Word: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).**

Outside my office window on the front lawn of the church are three crosses. The elders erected them during my first Holy Week here at Epiphany, and they’ve been there ever since. Their surfaces were smooth when they first went up, but now they are weather-worn, split and cracked by the sun, wind, and rain (the old, rugged cross?). Yet there they remain, reminding me that Jesus did not die alone. “Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him” (Luke 23:32). At first, *both* men mocked and “reviled” him and “railed against him” also (Matt. 27:44; Luke 23:39). The literal Greek means blaspheme. “Are you not the Christ?” they taunted, cawing like carrion crows. “Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). Yet it was precisely *because* Jesus was saving them that he remained on the cross and *did not* come down. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote nearly 400 years ago, it was love, not the nails, that kept Jesus on the cross.

Yet suddenly, something unexpected startled one of the crucified criminals out of his dying rage and onto the path of life. Jesus’ Word created faith in his heart—no doubt that previous word, “Father, forgive,” overheard by the thieves.

So he turned to Jesus, straining his neck, and begging, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). It was no death bed conversion—there was no bed, only a splintered cross—but it proves that it’s never too late to believe in Jesus—not until you take your last breath. As Martin Luther wrote in his last words, “In the end we are all beggars. It is true.”

“Jesus, remember me.”

And Jesus did remember him. Moved by mercy, he assured the man, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus never lies. He always tells the truth because he *is* “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He is faithful and cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). Jesus promised the thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Jesus always keeps his promises—“all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20)—and so we can be certain that even now this malefactor is in heaven with his Messiah.

The Bible teaches that, for Christians, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Although death is our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), believers have nothing to fear because to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. “Today you will be *with me* in Paradise.” Paradise (*paradeisos*) is a Persian loan-word and originally meant a kind of garden in which to rest and refresh after a long, hot day. Life on earth is never easy—not for a dying thief, not for the sick and suffering, not for any of us. Yet Jesus promises rest from our labors as we await the new heaven and the new earth on the Last Day when he returns to remake the earth as Eden born anew (Rev. 14:13; 21:5).

Until that day, Jesus promises Paradise and rest for all who come to him by faith: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and

learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). And so we pray, “Jesus, remember me.”

**The Third Word: “Woman, behold your son! ... Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26-27).**

With these words, Jesus redefines family and shows us what kind of family is the most important of all: our fellowship, or life together (*koinōnia*), in the Church. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus shocked us and dismayed his mother and siblings when he asked, “Who are my mother and brothers?” (Mark 3:33), which he answered by saying, “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). In another place, Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Those words must have hurt Mary’s heart. Although well-intended, Jesus’ words sometimes had a bite to them. No wonder Simeon warned her, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35).

Those of us in the Church or who belong to conservative political parties like to imagine ourselves to be the champions of so-called “Family Values.” But in his preaching, Jesus seemed to espouse an *Anti-Family* message. But Jesus is not anti-family. Jesus is anti-idolatry. If love your family more than you love God, you cannot follow Jesus. Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead!” (Matt. 8:22). Nothing may come between you and Jesus.

But Jesus does not hate families. He is the author of the Fourth Commandment: “Honor your father and your mother...” (Ex. 20:12). Christ himself submitted to his earthly parents and obeyed them (Luke 2:51). At the wedding of Cana in Galilee, Jesus performed his first miracle—turning water into wine—at his mother Mary’s request (John 2). And, lest we forget, Jesus was a guest at a *wedding*—proving his love for marriage and family.

Jesus does not hate families. Jesus *loves* families! And he loved his own family too, which is why, even in his dying woes, he looked out for his mother Mary and entrusted her to the care of his beloved disciple, John. In the ancient world, women depended on men for protection, provision, and security. If a woman did not have a husband, father, or son, she remained destitute and desolate. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “In those days, a mother’s children were her Medicare, her Social Security, and her pension.”<sup>7</sup> And so Jesus, knowing that he would be unable to fulfill the filial duties of the firstborn, gave his disciple John as a surrogate son to Mary, one who would care for her and keep her safe in the arms of the newborn Christian Church.

We may wonder: Why wouldn’t Jesus just ask one of his brothers or cousins to care for Mary instead? The answer is quite simple: they did not yet believe in him (John 7:5). And Jesus knew that even though his brothers cared for Mary, they could not care for her in the most important way: soul care—the love of one Christian for another. For as much as we love our family and friends, our greatest love and allegiance must be for Christ and his Church. Once we believe and are baptized, we are adopted into a new family—God’s family (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5). As John writes in his first letter, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). And that is why Jesus said to Mary, “Woman, behold your son!” and to John, “Behold, your mother!”

**The Fourth Word: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).**

This is, without a doubt, the most terrifying thing Jesus ever said. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” How in the world could God abandon his only-begotten Son?

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Mother of the New,” in *Home by Another Way* (Lanham, Maryland: Cowley Publications, 1999), 97.

How could the Father forget about Christ? How could Jesus feel separated from God when he himself is divine? Were his words only for effect? Were they mere sentiment? Or was Jesus really, truly abandoned by God in that moment on the cross? And, if God could abandon Jesus, then what about you and me? Are we ever really safe if there is a possibility of God forsaking *us*?!

I do not pretend to know the full meaning of Jesus' desperate, pleading prayer, which is a quotation of Psalm 22. But I do know that Jesus didn't say things only for show. In some very real, terrible way, he felt abandoned and forsaken by God on the cross. He *had* to feel abandoned in order to bear the full brunt of God's wrath against sin—*our* sin—a wrath that is most experienced in eternal separation from the presence of God. "Depart from me, you cursed..." (Matt. 25:41).

And yet, even in his terrible sorrow, even in his desperate prayer, Jesus did not despair or give up hope. He kept the faith. The God he believed forsook him never stopped being *his* God! Taylor writes: "Jesus died talking to his Abba [Father], who would not talk back to him. Is there any other definition of faith? In his suffering, he is the comfort of those who have no comfort. In his abandonment, he is the God of those who have no God."<sup>8</sup> As he prayed, "My God, my God!" our heavenly Father remained Jesus' God even as he prayed that horrible prayer from Psalm 22 on behalf of all God's people when they find themselves in their darkest hour. "Hearing no voice of love, [Jesus] cried out, making a sound that—for many—became the voice of love."<sup>9</sup>

The Good News for you is that because God abandoned Jesus on the cross, he will *never*,

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Voice of Love," in *Home by Another Way* (Lanham, Maryland: Cowley Publications, 1999), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, "The Voice of Love," 85.

*ever* abandon you. Jesus bore your sin to the cross. And as the sin-bearer of the entire world, Christ, the innocent Son, actually became sin for us “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus was cursed and forsaken because he *became* the curse for us (Gal. 3:13). But now, because God abandoned Jesus, he will never abandon you.

“None of us ever have to fill what he felt again,” writes Taylor. “Because he was all alone, and we have his company. At our most hurt, our most frightened, our most forsaken by God, we have this companion who has been there and will be there with us.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Jesus promises, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Come hell or high water, Jesus “will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). The prayer of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” may at times *feel* like your prayer and your circumstance. But it is no longer *your* prayer. Instead we draw near to God. The blood of Jesus has paved the way. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

**The Fifth Word: “I thirst” (John 19:28).**

“I thirst.” Here we see Jesus in the full frailty of his humanity. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us so that he might *die* among us—and *for* us.

Dying is hard work, as I can attest from being at the bedside of many dying people. Those near death are often parched and dehydrated. Their tongues cling to the roofs of their mouths, and their speech becomes raspy. They thirst.

So the soldiers gave Jesus a sip of sour wine, the cheap wine vinegar that passed for refreshment among working men and women. At the Last Supper, Jesus had told his disciples that he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until he drank it anew in his Father’s kingdom

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *ibid.*

(Matt. 26:29). With a crown of thorns and a placard that read “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” perhaps the kingdom had already come. It was time to drink down to the very dregs from the cup which the Father would not let pass him by (Matt. 26:39). That is why he said, “I thirst.”

We thirst too, whether we realize it or not. Not just physical thirst, but I am speaking of the spiritual thirst that comes from having a thirsty spirit, a conscience that needs to be cooled by the living water of Christ. The Psalms capture this feeling perfectly: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps. 42:2). “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1). “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1). Life apart from Christ is certainly dry and weary. There is no rest or relief without Jesus there to quench your thirst.

That is why Jesus offers living water:

“If you knew the gift of God..., he would have given you living water.... Everyone who drinks of this [well] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10, 13-14).

Ironically, the same Jesus who offered living water to the woman by the well (John 4) and the crowds at the festival (John 7), is the very same Jesus who said, “I thirst.” Yet, even in death, he kept his promise to give us living water—flowering water. When “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, ...at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). Out of the Temple of Jesus’ body flowed a stream of living water, and wherever this water goes, it brings life—*eternal* life (cp. Ezek. 47:1-12; John 2:21; Rev. 22:1-2).

**The Sixth Word: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46).**

Jesus never gave up hope or faith in God, his Father. So now, at the bitter end of his earthly life, Jesus prayed to the Father and entrusted his entire spirit and being into God’s hands.

We may wonder, “How could Jesus pray to God if he is already the Son of God—that is, God himself?” To answer that question, we would have to go into detailed explanations of the humiliation and *kenosis* (“emptying”) of Christ. But we do not have time for that. It is enough to remember that Jesus’ prayer, the prayer of David in Psalm 31, is at its heart the prayer of all the faithful people of God when they are in distress and harried by their enemies. When we are at wit’s end, and all other helpers flee, we can and should finally and fully entrust ourselves to God’s care. “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act” (Ps. 37:5). Even in the midst of suffering and sorrow, pain and death, we don’t have to be afraid because God remains our God, and he will rescue us (Ps. 31:5, 14).

But after the terrible abandonment by God on the cross, how could Jesus still pray to his God and our God (cp. John 20:17)? Because as one who prayed the Psalms, Jesus also knew the prophecy of hope in Psalm 16: “For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:10-11). Psalm 16 is a prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus Christ! Jesus was confident that even after he died on the cross, the Father would raise him from the dead. And so, even in his dying, Jesus knew that death was not the end for him. And because it would not be the end for him, it will not be the end for us. By God’s grace, we too may commend our spirits into his care for the duration of this life and the next. That is why at Christian funerals, we often pray the *Benedictus*, or Simeon’s Song: “Lord, lettest now Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word” (Luke 2:29, KJV). With confident hope, knowing that everything had been accomplished, Jesus was able to pray, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46).

**The Last Word: “It is finished” (John 19:30).**

“It is finished” is the affirmation of a job well done. Here on the cross, Jesus echoes the summary statement of the Creation account from Genesis: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done...” (Gen. 2:1-2). All things have a beginning and an end, and Jesus’ work of redemption was done. In perfect obedience to the will of God, he had fulfilled the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17), the commandment of God that we ourselves cannot keep because of our fallen, sinful condition. Jesus had overcome every temptation of the devil, including the final temptation to come down from the cross (Luke 4:13; Heb. 4:15). The cup of God’s wrath could not pass by Jesus’ lips, and so he drank it down to the dregs, pouring out his life blood on the cross, destroying the power of sin and death and crushing the evil serpent underfoot (Gen. 3:15; 1 John 3:8; Heb. 2:14). Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, and so he did. He came to live and die and give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28), and so he did. And having done all these things, Jesus was done. And because it is Jesus who does it, he does all things well (Mark 7:37), including his dying. “It is finished.”

Pontius Pilate was amazed at how quickly Jesus had died when Joseph of Arimathea asked to bury his body (Mark 15:44). Crucifixion was a long and agonizing way to die. Some victims might hang on the cross for *days* at a time before they expired. That is why the Roman soldiers broke the legs of the criminals next to Jesus, so they would asphyxiate faster (John 19:32-33). But Jesus was already dead. He died on his time, his terms. Nobody “took” his life from him. He offered it up freely as a gift.

Jesus prophesied his death and resurrection in his famous Good Shepherd Sermon: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have

authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

Ultimately, Jesus received his “charge,” his mission, his marching orders—and death order—from his Father, not from Pilate, not from Caiaphas, not from the crowds that madly cried, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Jesus died because God told him to die. He was “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). And because he did everything God required, he allowed them to pierce his hands and punch his side before he declared, “It is finished.” The work of dying and saving the world was done. It was time to rest and spend the Sabbath in the tomb. So Jesus hung up his tools (hammer and nails), bowed his head, and gave up the ghost. In the name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.