

Good Friday April 14, 2017

It is Finished

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There is a point in time when a master woodworker steps back from her or his creation, be it a desk, a table, a chair, or bookshelf, and considers there is no more cutting or sanding to be done. No more staining. The thing the woodworker set out to make is done, and so he or she proclaims: *it is finished*.

Likewise, I am sure students and professors are aware that the end of the academic year is only a few short weeks away. And in a few weeks the students who have met all the requirements, completed all their projects, will walk across a stage when their names are called to receive the degree they worked so hard to earn and in that moment they might even say, *it is finished*. They have done what they set out to do, they have worked, sacrificed, overcome challenges, and did what was necessary to receive their degree. Like the master woodworker, their “it is finished” is a proclamation of celebration, signifying something important, some long, labor intensive task has reached completion. Such a moment can be one of pride, a moment of accomplishment, certainly a good and joyful thing.

Which might make Jesus’ very last words on the cross seem out of place. We have heard once again the painful agony of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, how his disciples pretty much abandoned him, and not even his influential followers could help him or save him from the terrible violence of the flogging, nor of the shame and humiliation of death on a cross. This is the part of the Gospel where it is really - really hard to believe this is Good News, because it sure looks like Jesus lost. That even God abandoned him to die in naked shame and humiliation and in excruciating pain.

Yet the word used in the original Greek for Jesus final word is not a word that means a giving up or giving in. It is not a word expressing disenchantment, regret, or bitterness. It is a word much like the master woodworker and graduate used: a word meaning it is completed, it is perfected. As another preacher has noticed, it is a word with cosmic and timeless importance. Jesus’ final word on the cross is a declaration as celebratory as the wood worker and graduate; the work he set out to do is utterly, perfectly, complete. Jesus has accomplished that which he set out to do.

And just what had Jesus finished? What was the work he talked about periodically in other places in John’s Gospel? Such as when his disciples found him talking with a Samaritan woman at a historical well and asked if he had eaten he said his food was to do the work of God. What was this sustaining work? Certainly it wasn’t to make a table or earn a degree in theology.

The answer can be found quite early in John's Gospel, when John the Baptist declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. According to John, that is the work of Jesus, to take away the sins of the world.

As beautiful as that sounds, if we look around, we don't have to look very far to see sin isn't gone. Jesus didn't take it away; sin is as pervasive as it has ever been. People still chose to hurt one another, people still choose greed instead of mercy, violence instead of love, anger instead of peace, revenge instead of forgiveness, division instead of understanding, power instead of equality. The word sin can have many interpretations; it can mean simply breaking one of the 10 Commandments, it can mean choosing your own will instead of choosing God's will, sin is pushing God away, either intentionally or unintentionally. And sin always hurts us. Most of the suffering of the world is caused by it. So often we human beings try to overcome the effects of sin with more sin, and while there might be a greater good achieved, like winning a war, often the warriors who return home do so wounded emotionally or physically, or families are forever mourning the death of their loved one.

I've seen how sin can alienate people from each other; how a need to be right, or blame, or political preferences can give priority over compassion and understanding.

In the Old Testament, there was a system that required people to offer up an animal sacrifice once a year as a way to acknowledge and repent of their sins, of the harm they have done. But this system failed at bringing people and God back together.

So we heard in the beginning of John's Gospel that the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us. Worked among us. The work of Jesus was to show us the love of God by loving us. By including the people that were often left out. By healing and teaching and telling some pretty amazing stories. By standing up to the political and religious and politically religious authorities. By loving the very sin we human beings tend to cling to as if we can't help it, and instead of avoiding our sin and the suffering sin causes, Jesus dove into it head first. That is how he ended up naked, bloody, and dead on a cross.

So how did he take away that sin we can't seem to let go of? What Jesus accomplished wasn't the removal of our free wills, we can still choose to sin just as much as we could before his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. What Jesus accomplished is to free us from the damage sin does to us; imprisoning us in the myth that we must do something to earn God's love, God's forgiveness, God's mercy. Sin

tells us we will never be good enough for God, we can't ever live into God's expectations. And Jesus showed us that while there might be truth in our desire to choose self over God that doesn't mean God makes the same choice. Instead, God chooses us, every time. No matter what we do.

As Episcopal priest Flemming Rutledge has written, this is perhaps one of the most difficult things for us to believe: that we do not need to earn God's forgiveness, love or mercy. That is what Jesus showed us in his terrible death on the cross, for certainly the crucifixion is one big embodiment of sin. Yet in the moment when it looked like sin had won, that everyone around Jesus had chosen sin instead of God, instead of love and mercy, Jesus proclaimed it is finished. He had traveled into the heart of sin itself and now God is there. Which may be why so many Christians wear crosses over their hearts.

The Good News for us on Good Friday isn't that we have to finish what Jesus started, because Jesus finished it. He did what he set out to do. Instead, the Good News is we are free to receive the love God freely gives us, a love that proves greater than death; greater than sin.