

**“I Thirst”**  
**(The Seven Last Words of Jesus: The Fifth Word)**

John 19:28-29

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian  
Church of Portland, Indiana on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 13, 2016]

I

The Fifth Word from the cross brings us face to face with the physical suffering of Jesus.

By this time Jesus has been on the cross almost six hours.

The ordeal has taken its toll on his body.

The heat of the sun,  
the sweat dripping from his every pore,  
the blood oozing from his many wounds,  
the fever,  
the exhaustion,  
the pain,  
the agony,  
all of it has drained the fluids from his body  
and sapped his strength.

His thirst was overwhelming.

So with cracked lips,  
parched tongue,  
and rasping voice Jesus says,  
**“I thirst.”**

II

At first glance this Fifth Word seems almost out of place when compared with the four that precede it.

The First Word is a highly charged theological word—  
a word of forgiveness for those who placed Jesus on the cross:

*“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

The Second Word is a word of hope to the criminal on the cross next to Jesus: *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

The Third Word is a word of compassion and command,  
as Jesus creates a new family for his mother and the beloved disciple:  
*“Woman, behold your son...Behold your mother.”*

The Fourth Word probes the depths of the mystery of suffering—  
that sense of being abandoned by God that all of us have known:  
*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

The Fifth Word seems rather mundane in comparison.

Jesus is thirsty.

Well, so what?

Haven't we all been thirsty?

But few of us have ever experienced such extreme thirst.

The degree of thirst suffered by victims of crucifixion must have been indescribable.

Have you ever been so thirsty that your lips cracked,  
your throat ached,  
your tongue swelled?

Then you've had a small taste of what it was like for Jesus on the cross.

At one level the Fifth Word reminds us that Jesus was a human being,  
Jesus was thirsty,  
Jesus was one of us.

The Fifth Word is a strikingly human word,  
a word arising out of Jesus' humanity.

If this word from the cross says anything to us,

it is that this was a human being up there on that cross.

Not a God in disguise...  
 not a phantom of divinity...  
 not a fantastic half-God, half-man...  
 not some kind of super hero....

This was truly a human being—  
 suffering,  
 bleeding,  
 and, in his dying moment, thirsting.

Jesus thirsted as we thirst and then he died as we die.

This was an important point for the writer of the Gospel of John,  
 because even as he wrote there were some in the ancient world who saw  
 Jesus as a spirit who only appeared to be human.

These were the “docetists,”  
 from the Greek word *dokeo*,  
 which means “to seem” or “to appear.”

The docetists were early Gnostics who taught that Jesus wasn’t really human,  
 but a divine spirit who only seemed to be human.

Because such a spirit could not die, or even feel pain,  
 Jesus only seemed or appeared to die on the cross;  
 it was merely a drama.

Some even went so far as to say that it wasn’t really Jesus on the cross.

They believed that when Simon of Cyrene carried the cross,  
 he ended up taking the place of Jesus.

The Son of God, they said, would never allow himself to be defeated by evil  
 people,  
 nor would he end up suffering and dying on a cross.

John wrote his gospel at the time when some of these ideas were circulating, and it  
 is possible that in recounting the thirst of Jesus, he was essentially saying:

*“I was there...  
 I stood by the cross...  
 I witnessed his suffering...  
 I heard him cry out, ‘I thirst.’*

*He did not merely seem to be suffering and dying...  
 that was a human being, dying on that cross!”*

So the words, “I thirst” are one more example of Jesus’ humanity.

Jesus did not circumvent death any more than he circumvented the suffering he could have avoided when, the night before he died he prayed to his heavenly Father,

*“Let this cup pass from me...  
 but nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”*

**Jesus said, “I thirst.”**

### III

Not only is this a human word, but it is also a word of humility.

This is no pious prayer addressed to God;  
 it is a request to coarse and common soldiers.

Christ, the Son of God, asks for a drink of water.

This is complete and utter helplessness.

Jesus was unable to help himself,  
 to get himself a drink.

Could anything be more degrading,  
 more demeaning,  
 more humiliating,  
 than the Son of God asking for a drink from his enemies?

What irony that the One who changed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana,  
 the One who at Jacob’s well offered living water to the Samaritan woman,

the One who promised his followers that from their hearts would flow  
 rivers of water,  
 now, like the rich man Dives in one of his parables,  
 must ask for a drop of water to quench his own desperate thirst.

Yet this is the cup of suffering God gave to God's Son.

And this is the cup God's Son drank—  
 drank it to the dregs,  
 drank until he thirsted!

**Jesus said, "I thirst."**

#### IV

At this point the soldiers respond to Jesus' plea.

One of them puts a sponge on a branch of hyssop,  
 soaks it in some sour wine,  
 and puts it up to Jesus' mouth.

Why hyssop?

John is the only gospel writer who adds this detail and,  
 as is typical with John,  
 this seemingly insignificant detail is a clue to John's deeper meaning.

Hyssop was a small bushy plant, and affixing a sponge of any size to a hyssop  
 branch would be an odd and nearly impossible task.

So perhaps John's point is not botany but theology.

For any first century Jewish reader, the mention of hyssop would have immediately  
 taken them back to the Book of Exodus and the story of the Passover—  
 how God protected the Hebrew slaves in Egypt from the final plague,  
 the Angel of Death, who would pass through the land of Egypt,  
 causing the deaths of the first born among all the flocks  
 and the first born among all the families of the Egyptians.

The Hebrews were to kill and eat the Passover lamb,  
 but only after they had taken the blood of the lamb and,

using *a branch of hyssop*,  
 sprinkled the blood on the door frames and lintels of their  
 houses.

In this way when the Angel of Death went through the land the children of Israel  
 were would be protected and be delivered from slavery in Egypt.

Only John calls Jesus the “Lamb of God.”

Only in John’s Gospel does Jesus’ crucifixion take place as the Passover lambs are  
 being slaughtered in the Temple.

So in telling us about the hyssop branch, John was not giving us a needless bit of  
 information,

but pointing us toward the deeper meaning of Jesus’ death.

Jesus was initiating a new covenant between God and humankind;

he was cleansing all who would trust in him;

he was saving us from slavery to sin;

and he was delivering us from the threat of death.

**Jesus said, “I thirst.”**

## V

The soldier offers Jesus the sour wine,

and it is also hard to know exactly what to make of this.

It could have been intended as a narcotic to relieve his suffering,

or it could have been a hostile gesture to increase his suffering.

Scholars have not been able to come to a firm conclusion.

Each of the four gospels tells about the wine in a different way.

In the three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—someone in the crowd  
 of people around the cross takes the initiative to offer Jesus a drink.

But in John, it is Jesus who takes the initiative.

**“After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), ‘I thirst.’”**

What scripture is Jesus fulfilling?

Many have suggested verses from Psalm 22, particularly verses 14-15:

*I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;  
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.*

Others suggest the psalm we read earlier, Psalm 69, where verse 21 reads,

*They gave me poison for food,  
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*

But the important thing for us to remember is that in John’s Gospel, when the Lord Jesus says, “I thirst,”  
he is speaking out of his sovereign control of his own mission.

This is the Son of God speaking,  
the Second person of the Holy Trinity.

Even in the midst of his helpless condition,  
he is clearly aware of his divine destiny.

This is how John portrays the story of Jesus’ passion from beginning to end.

In chapter 10 Jesus said,

*“I lay down my life for my sheep...no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father.”*

In John 18:11, when Jesus is being arrested, Peter draws his sword and wounds the high priest’s servant.

Jesus says, “*Put your sword away...Am I not to drink the cup the Father has set before me?*”

As Fleming Rutledge reminds us,  
     the crucifixion is not an accident,  
         not a mistake,  
             not an unfortunate slip-up.

It is the deliberate self-offering of the Lamb of God.

Jesus says, “I thirst,” to show that he is fulfilling his purpose according to the plan of God from the beginning.

## VI

John goes on to say that when he had drunk from the sponge,  
     he said, “It is finished,” and he died.

And at that moment the Fifth Word from the cross becomes a word of identification.

Jesus identifies with all the thirsty,  
                                   hurting,  
                                   suffering,  
                                   dying human beings of our world.

When Jesus says, “I thirst,” he lets us know that all of the thirsts and longings we humans have known were felt by him on the cross.

The nameless soldier who responds to his request was, without knowing it, carrying out the words Jesus had spoken months earlier in Matthew 10:42:

*“Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”*

When Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 25—

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison*

*and you visited me...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:35-36, 40)—*

did he have any way of knowing that a Roman soldier would give him something to quench his thirst?

Jesus identifies with us by allowing himself to be one of the “least of these.”

In his humanity and in his humility,  
 in his identification with every thirsty person,  
 Jesus allowed someone to do for him  
 the very thing he called his followers to do for others.

**Jesus said, “I thirst.”**

## VII

The reality is that you and I stand at the foot of the cross.

We look up and see Jesus.

Try as we might to avoid it, we hear the words from his parched lips,  
**“I thirst.”**

We cannot escape those words.

We hear them every day of our lives.

We hear Jesus say, “I thirst,” for the homeless men and women sleeping on park benches or living under highway overpasses.

We hear Jesus say, “I thirst,” in the desperate cries of refugees from Syria who continue to flee by the hundreds of thousands from the violence, terror, and destruction of their country.

We hear Jesus say, “I thirst,” in the lives of our elders in nursing homes whose families never come to visit.

We hear Jesus say, “I thirst,” in the lives of young people who abuse drugs in an attempt to find meaning in life.

We hear Jesus say, “I thirst,” in the need of the people of Flint, Michigan and millions of other people around the world who do not have a supply of safe, clean water.

The presence of Jesus on the cross means that the problems of  
 housing and homelessness,  
 hunger and starvation,  
 adequate medical care and quality education,  
 the right to work and the freedom to vote,  
 poverty and prosperity,  
 war and peace,  
 are his concerns,  
 even as he hangs there and says,  
*“I thirst.”*

When Christ says, “I thirst,” he call us as his followers to respond not only to his cry of need,  
 but to every cry of need that issues forth from suffering humanity.

### VIII

In the academy award winning movie, *Ben Hur*, two powerful scenes frame the message of that movie.

In the first scene, Judah Ben Hur, falsely condemned, is being taken away in chains to be a slave of the Roman Empire.

The column of condemned men is stopped at a small village for some water.

Because Ben Hur has been so rebellious, the centurion in charge refuses to allow him anything to drink.

In desperation, Judah calls out to God for help.

Then, as if out of nowhere, hands reach out to him and give him a drink.

Judah looks up and sees a face unlike any he has ever seen—  
 it is the face of pure love.

He is astonished, and yet he is thankful for the One who has responded to his thirst and given him a drink of cool water.

The second scene occurs late in the movie.

Judah Ben Hur, now the adopted son of a Roman nobleman, returns to Jerusalem to discover the fate of his mother and sister.

There he learns of the man called the Christ who is to be crucified.

Judah sees the procession as it winds its way through the city, and he realizes that he has seen the man carrying his cross somewhere before.

When the man stumbles and falls,  
     Judah quickly jumps from the crowd,  
         grabs a bucket of water,  
             and goes to where the man lies to offer him a drink.

Once again Judah Ben Hur looks into that same mysterious face—  
     the face of love—  
         and realizes that the One to whom he now gave water to drink,  
             who would soon be crucified,  
                 was the same One who had given him a drink  
             when he was thirsty beyond measure.

## IX

**Jesus said, “I thirst.”**

In saying that, he showed us that every time we give  
     a cup of cool water to a thirsty nobody,  
         we quench the thirst of God.

Amen.

Sources:

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