

“It Is Finished”ⁱ
Sunday, April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday in Lent

 **John 19:30 (NRSV)**

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “*It is finished.*”

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

We are not far from the end of the school year.

Very soon, in high schools and colleges across the nation, students will celebrate graduation.

I think of my own college experience and recall how difficult it all seemed in the beginning.

This wasn't high school anymore; expectations were much higher and we were on our own.

Endless lectures, tons of reading, and lots of caffeine were normal as we marched toward *commencement*.

When graduation comes, we look back on the years of study and frustration and we say: “*It’s finished; it’s over! Hooray!*”

There is irony here – we celebrate the *end* of something as we celebrate “commencement,” the *beginning* of something new.

This morning we listen as Jesus says, “*It is finished.*”

What is Jesus talking about? His *life*? His death? His *suffering*?

I also wonder if there is irony in this scene too.

Once we figure out what is finished, what do we imagine might be *commencing*?

Let us pray...Lord, help us to discern your message this morning. Is the battle over or is it just beginning? Lead us in our study. In Jesus’ name, we pray. **Amen.**

I think we have difficulty answering the question, “What is finished?” because we don’t have a complete answer to the question, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?”

In the language of the church, this area of study is called “*atonement theology*.”

That’s just church-speak for, “*Why?*”

We do not live in a culture where blood sacrifice is common; we don’t understand the concepts that drove the ancient Israelites to come to the altar with burnt offerings to atone for their sins.

So, we don’t have any frame of reference to apply to the idea that Jesus died to atone for our sins.

To help with this problem, church leaders have developed a number of different metaphors to describe the nature of Jesus’ death.

This has led to different understandings of what his death actually means for us.

In his book, “*Final Words*,” Adam Hamilton writes:

“In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ death is an atoning sacrifice to save from sin; a substitutionary sacrifice to save from death; a demonstration of divine love for humanity; a model Christians are meant to look to in practicing sacrificial love; a compelling portrait of Jesus intended to stir the hearts of thousands more to come and follow him; a sign of God’s ultimate triumph over death; and a dramatic reversal of the events of Eden following the disobedience of Adam and Eve.”ⁱⁱ

There are other metaphors found in the gospels and in Paul’s writings.

The point is, there are many different theories to consider and, unfortunately, most Christians tend to latch on to only one theory of the Atonement and treat it as if that is all Jesus was trying to accomplish on the cross.

We cling to the explanation that is easiest for us to understand; even though all may be valid.

The issue is that we then limit the power of Jesus on the cross to only what we can comprehend.

As Rev. Hamilton reminds us, “*Jesus was doing far more on the cross than any one theory or metaphor possibly can contain.*” ⁱⁱⁱ

Each of the images of Jesus on the cross helps us to understand a different aspect of Jesus’ true nature.

He is our Redeemer, our Savior, our High Priest, and our Atoning Lamb.

We see a Liberator and King willing to die for his people.

Jesus’ death reveals our sinfulness, our selfishness, and our utter need for God.

It also reveals how costly God’s grace is and the magnitude of God’s mercy towards us.

Jesus shows us what love really looks like.

On Calvary, Jesus identifies with our pain and suffering and our mortality; in resurrection, he shows us that he overcame all of these.

The point is to remind us that the language and metaphor we use is meant “*to describe something so profound, so mysterious, so life-giving, and so*

life-changing that no one explanation or metaphor can do it justice.”^{iv}

They tell us in seminary that, most of the time, preachers are preaching to themselves.

With that in mind, I have to assume that many of us share the challenge of making sense of what happened on the cross that Friday afternoon.

It seems like we are only able to look at the cross through our human eyes.

Through God’s eyes, however, there is beauty, drama, and poetry at work here.

We look at the grotesque images and wonder why Jesus had to suffer so much.

Through God’s eyes we see a masterpiece that is a self-portrait of God revealing his true character to us and his willingness to offer us grace.

The drama of Christ’s passion and death is a love story that moves us to tears and begs us to read it over and over again.

It is why we come back to this story year after year.

It is why we see something fresh and new in the story every time we read it.

So, what is finished when Jesus says this word?

It is important to notice that he says,

“**I** *is finished,*” not “**I** *am finished.*”

Jesus did all that he intended to do in his life.

He told the story of God’s love; he healed people to demonstrate that love; and he helped us recognize God’s presence in the world.

At the end of it all, in spite of the soldiers and the politicians and the ungrateful mob; in spite of what his own disciples may have thought, Jesus succeeded in his primary mission.

He says with confidence, “***It is finished!***”

It is a **triumphant** word;

some believe he *shouted* it.

Jesus did not die as a frustrated, failed revolutionary.

His death **was the revolution.**

Completion of his mission leads to the *commencement* of his *revolution*.

Churches are notorious for burn-out.

Pastors get burned out by the, “it’s never finished” nature of pastoral ministry.

There is always one more sermon to write, one more hurting person to counsel, one more book to read, one more meeting to attend.

There seems to be no sense of completion.

Volunteers get burned out because the work never moves on to somebody else.

The same people are asked to be on committees and spearhead projects, year-after-year.

There is no relief and volunteers begin to view the work as a “*job*” rather than a gift to give.

When Jesus prayed in the Garden, he prayed that this cup might pass him by.

He did not seem to be enthusiastic about the work he was being asked to do; he didn’t *want* to die.

When it was obvious that this was his Father’s will, he embraced the work and went to the cross.

He endured it all and came to where it was finished.

If we look at the burn-out we sometimes experience in church work, we should realize the irony we face.

We actually *do* accomplish good things and we *can* often say, “it is finished.”

But, as each task is completed, another begins because the mission that began with Jesus will continue until he returns.

When Jesus says, “*It is finished,*” he means that this task is complete, but the work goes on.

Today, the work is being done by believers who may feel burned out from time to time; followers who may lose their enthusiasm and energy.

The burned-out preacher and the exhausted volunteer will one day be finished; but, the work will go on.

For all our good intentions, however, we need to understand this business between us and God.

There was some unpleasantness back in the Garden when we asserted our will over God’s.

There is the tendency we have to try to be gods unto ourselves; there is our rebellion, our stubbornness, our violent pride, our sin.

Today, Jesus speaks to us, not with words, but with a deed; Jesus does for us what we are unable to do for ourselves.

We see now that discipleship is not **first** a matter of our doing something for God but a matter of having something done for us **by God**.

We see now a God who moves, acts, suffers, finishes, and accomplishes; very different from the passive, hands-off God much of Christianity has constructed for itself.

I must confess that we, as Methodists, have a habit of coming to church each week looking for our assignment.

We give you a place to take notes in the bulletin; we encourage you to listen for what God asks of you each week.

“This week, church, work on your racism, your sexism, and your manners. Come back next

week for a new assignment,” the preacher says every Sunday.

“*God told me to tell you to love more and give more,*” we hear again and again.

No wonder we leave worship more depressed and more burdened than we were when we got here.

It’s all about us; we need to settle accounts with God, pay-up to get right.

We all share the blame for making this our normal behavior.

So, what’s the most important thing to hear in Jesus’ words today?

What now is to be done by us? *Nothing.*

What might we learn from the lessons of this day? *Nothing.*

What are we supposed to do for God before nightfall? *Nothing.*

Haven’t you heard? ***“It is finished!”***

You see, this isn’t about us and what we’re supposed to do for God; it’s about what God already did for us.

This grotesque masterpiece of grace and love is just for us and it's enough.

This is the moment when God convicts us of our sin, reveals to us the costliness of grace, takes up the sins of the world, and shows us what love looks like so that we might follow by living lives of sacrificial love.

If the world could only comprehend that the cross, that sign of humiliation and defeat, is actually God's greatest victory, the world would be reconciled to God.

If the church was less busy trying to do our part to pay our debt to God, maybe we could come to church to do nothing but be still; just sit and listen.

If we just stop and see the cross for what it really is; if we can just look upon it for the many things that it truly is, we would see God's love.

Just be still and know that God is God and we are not.

On the cross, we see our brokenness and God's
grace.

We see our need to be loved and God's expression
of love.

We see a picture of how we're meant to live our
lives from this time forward.

Everything we see in the world around us we see in
the light of the cross.

The sad dealings between us and God can only be
finished by God.

We've run up debts that can't be covered by us.

The good news is: that debt is paid.

"It is finished!"

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ This worship series is based on the book, *"Thank God It's Friday"* by William H. Willimon, © 2006 by Abingdon Press, Nashville

ⁱⁱ Hamilton, Adam *Final Words from the Cross*, © 2011, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. Page 106

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., page 105

^{iv} Ibid., page 107