Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Sermons by Theologian Gilbert Meilaender
The Sixth and Seventh Words of Christ from the Cross

The Sixth Word

"It is finished."

"It is finished," Jesus says. What's finished? Not just his life. Not just his suffering on the cross. What's finished is the entire task he has undertaken in agreement with his Father and in the power of their Spirit. That is the task of sharing our life to its very end, as our representative in the flesh. He has done that and done it faithfully in a way we ourselves could not.

John's Gospel depicts the arc of Jesus' life very simply: He came from his Father and returns to his Father—drawing us back to the God from whom we have turned away, making known to us what the Father has made known to him, sending the Spirit who binds him and his Father together in love in order to create here among us a community of love. And that work he now completes—finishes—on the cross, which, however strange it may seem to us, is in John's Gospel the place where Jesus' glory is seen, the glory he had with the Father from eternity.

When Jesus comes to Jerusalem for that last, fatal time, he does not do so blindly. He can see what is happening and can guess what plans the leaders of the people may be making. "'And what shall I say?'" he asks. "'Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.'"

Christians sing a hymn called "In the cross of Christ I glory." We glory in it because that is where God shows his glory. We see here a very unusual God. If we Christians were not so accustomed to thinking about God in this way, we might be puzzled—or even, perhaps, offended. For this is not the way everyone thinks or has thought about God.

There is another famous story—no longer as famous as the story of Jesus on the cross, but, still, a story that as recently as, say, one hundred years ago every schoolchild would probably have known well. In what may be the most famous scene in Homer's *Iliad*, the aged Trojan king Priam comes to Achilles to plead for the body of his dead son, Hector, who has been slain by Achilles.

Achilles is a very hard man, but the sight of the old king begging for the body of his son moves Achilles to tears. Eventually both he and Priam together give way to their grief. But then Achilles says: We may as well stop these tears. There's no good to be gotten from them. This is just the kind of life we wretched men have; it's only the gods who live free of sorrows.

Only the gods live free of sorrows. That vision of the gods is strikingly apparent a little earlier in the poem when Hector—still alive at that point—confronts Achilles, who is terrifying in his power and anger. Even Hector, himself a mighty warrior, is afraid. But the goddess Athena comes to Hector disguised as his brother Deiphobus, and promises to help him in the fight against Achilles.

So Hector takes heart, thanking Deiphobus (or the one he thinks is Deiphobus) for daring, as he puts it, "to venture out from the walls, all for my sake, while the others stay inside and cling to safety."

Hector confronts Achilles and hurls his spear, but it glances off Achilles' shield. Hector shouts to Deiphobus to bring him another spear, but, Homer says,

> *the man was nowhere near him, vanished—*
> *yes and Hector knew the truth in his heart.*
> *I thought he was at my side, the hero Deiphobus—*
> *he's safe inside the walls.*

Homer's tale is a stirring one that has demonstrated remarkable staying power for centuries. But how different is the god it depicts from the One on whose crucifixion we look today—the God who says from the cross, "it is finished." For the God of whom St. John writes, the God whose death Christians everywhere ponder today, is not a god who lives free of sorrows. Not a god who stays safe inside the city walls. On the contrary, this is a God who shares our place, our sorrow, our end—a God who is by our side upon the plain, as Luther's great hymn puts it.

If our lives often seem out of control, so did his often seem to be. If the plans we've made look as if they are coming to a bad end, so did his. If we've been tempted to wonder whether there is any point or purpose to the days of our lives, surely he was so tempted. If we feel ourselves weakening and the strength of life ebbing away from us, so did he. Yet, for all that, it's very clear in John's Gospel that "it is finished" is not a despairing cry but a triumphant one. It is triumphant because it is the cry of One who was faithful to the finish, to the very end.

We really had no reason or right to expect such a faithful God, one who is willing to live as our representative and follow that course to the finish. Nevertheless, the God we could neither expect nor demand is the God we need and the God we can love.

We're a bit like the little girl who was afraid of the dark. To calm her fear, her parents would always assure her at bedtime that God was watching over her. But one night, maybe an especially dark night, she called her mother back in, wanting her to stay with her, and she said: "Mommy, I know God's in here with me, but I need somebody with skin."

That is what we have in this God on the cross: somebody with skin, like us, with us, for us in the flesh to the finish.

In the cross of that God we see glory. And to that God who faithfully stood by us on a green hill far away outside the city wall until he could say "it is finished,"

we therefore say today: “for that last triumphant cry, we praise you evermore on high.”

The Seventh Word

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.

We think of that as a child’s bedtime prayer—and so it is. But then, of course, Jesus says that unless we become as little children, we will not enter the kingdom.

Many of us probably learned that simple prayer as children—often, I suspect, with one concluding line added: “And this I ask for Jesus’ sake.” And Jesus’ own dying words on the cross may well be a prayer he himself had learned as a little Jewish boy, for he is simply quoting a line from the psalmist (31:5): “Into thy hand I commit my spirit.”

As we seek—not just today on Good Friday, but every day—to let our lives be drawn into the story of Jesus’ life, we ought to ask ourselves: How can I live so that, in my last breath, I am able to make Jesus’ prayer my own? So that I too can say: ‘Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

This is not the first time Jesus had said essentially this. He said it as a twelve-year old boy in the temple. He said it when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. He said it in his teaching—“consider the lilies; if your heavenly Father clothes them, how much more will he clothe you?” He said it when he went apart by himself, as he often did, to pray. He said it in Gethsemane—“not my will, but thine, be done.”

And he says it now—on the cross, on Good Friday—after everything he has been given to do is finished. He can say it now because he has been saying it day after day, moment after moment, every day of his life. So must we.

I made progress today on an important piece of work.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I read *Goodnight Moon* for the 18th time this week.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I’ve raised a son who’s about to graduate from college.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I didn’t get done what I told my friend I’d accomplish for her.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I spent the afternoon in the dentist’s chair.

Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I spent the evening in conversation with old friends.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.
I looked at the x-rays with the doctor and heard the diagnosis.
Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.

Day by day we must practice this in things big and things small. Practice letting go and handing over what we have and who we are, handing it over to Jesus' Father for safe keeping. And then, with Jesus and in the power Jesus' Spirit gives, we will be able to say it one last time. We will have learned to enter the kingdom as a little child.

However much we may talk about the innocence or naivete of youth, there's really nothing all that carefree about a child's existence. Children have problems and worries of their own.

So becoming as a little child does not mean being problem-free, carefree, or naïve. It means practice: practicing time after time, learning day after day, to say what does not come naturally or easily to most children: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep."

Even seemingly carefree children sometimes have bad dreams. They cry out for help in the night. Their mother, or their father, comes into the bedroom and says, "don't worry; everything's all right."

What do you mean—everything's all right? I didn't get my assignments done. I got into trouble at school. My knee hurts where I scraped it. And I see some scary faces over there in the corner. What do you mean—everything's all right?

And just what do we mean? What—or Who—gives us the authority to say in that dark of night: "You may let go and hand over your cares and your fears. You may go to sleep. Everything—everything's all right."

It does not look as if everything's all right on that cross on Calvary. Indeed, it looks as if almost everything has gone wrong. Nevertheless, Jesus has finished the work of perfect obedience and sacrifice the Father had given him to do as our representative—the second Adam, the faithful Israelite. He has finished what had to be done and finished it in a way we never really manage to finish our own plans and projects. Now he lets go of all plans and projects. He says: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep."

Everything's all right. And we too may let go. We may commit to Jesus' Father and our Father all that has gone well and all that has gone badly—and, perhaps especially, all that we have left unfinished and incomplete. We may do this because Jesus has finished his work for us and handed his life over to his Father. As one of the church's great evening hymns puts it:

Though bodies slumber,
hearts shall keep their vigil,
Forever resting
in the peace of Jesus.

And that is, after all, how we learned as little children—or should learn on this Good Friday—to close our evening prayer.

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.
And this I ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.