**“It is Finished.”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

Good Friday, March 28, 2013

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

I’ve only really had once teacher that I didn’t like. Her name was Mrs. Doyle. Turns out she’s actually a delightful woman, but when I was in first grade, she and her 2-minute math tests were the bane of my existence. Perhaps it is because of the suffering she caused me that year that I have so many vivid memories of 1st grade and relatively few of the other years of primary school. I especially remember one Friday, trying to complete my weekly math quiz, which was always a struggle. This particular week however, I managed to finish my five simple addition problems before the two minutes were up. Impressed with myself, I stood up and said to no one in particular, “I’m done!” Mrs. Doyle walked over and kind of poked me in the arm, the way you would poke a cake with a toothpick or a fork, and said, “No, you’re not done. You are finished. Cakes and meats are done. People are finished.”

I think of that moment every year on Good Friday when we read John’s Passion and get to Jesus’ last words, “It is finished.” I’ve often wondered whether it would be more correct for Jesus to say, “It is done” or “It is finished”. Is he referring to himself and his ministry? In which case “finished” is probably what Mrs. Doyle would prefer. Or is he referring to something much larger than just his own work, some more objective cosmic drama that has now played out? In which case done might be more appropriate. It all depends on the meaning of it. What is it that is completed on the Cross?

Of course, the tempting answer is to say “The salvation of humankind.” And indeed many Christians build their theology on the idea that it is Jesus’ death that completes our salvation. This theology is incredibly popular, and is closely connected to the glorification not of Jesus’ mission, ministry, values, and actions, but of his pain, his suffering, his victimization and bloody death. Popular though it may be, especially with certain filmmakers, ultimately, I believe this theology to be misguided, and even a bit dangerous. Misguided because, in fact, nothing is finished on Good Friday except the expiration of life from Jesus’ body. Dangerous because it suggests that Jesus’ suffering was in some desirable to God, and that therefore perhaps in some way our own suffering is in some way desirable to God.

To be sure, Jesus’ suffering is real. His persecution, trial, punishment and agony matters. His willingness to persist in his mission of compassion and peacemaking, even from the Cross itself is another – perhaps the most important -- sign of his divinity. Even facing his own mortality, these values and their importance to God mattered more to him than his own life. His willingness to endure the painful walk of the Cross without embittering his heart, without giving up on his attitude of forgiveness, is surely at the center of our redemption.

And yet, at the moment of Jesus’ death, nothing has been redeemed. There is no victory over death. Only death itself. The work of God is hardly finished. At least it better not be.

On that Friday, all there was for Jesus’ first followers, and for us as well, is sadness, anger and confusion. These are not pleasant feelings. Perhaps that’s why, in the middle ages, theologies of transactional atonement became so popular – because they attempt to give this senseless violence a spiritual purpose. If you believe, as these medieval theologians did, that Jesus’ death was some kind of payment that God required in order to fulfill a debt that humanity owed to God for our disobedience, then indeed our redemption would come in Jesus’ death, not in his rising. Then indeed, we could believe that ‘It is finished.’ Our ransom is paid. The bill is cancelled. It’s all is over. The cross is actually good. Frankly, this all seems to me like just another form of avoidance of the sadness, anger and confusion that is absolutely appropriate to mark this day.

Surely we can understand this desire to avoid the sadness, anger, and confusion that this day brings. Just look around. Though you’ll be fighting to get the 8th seat in a pew on Easter morning, tonight, there’s almost enough room for each of us to have their own row! This day is uncomfortable for us because it is the day we ponder the reality of Jesus’ violent death before that death’s meaning is fully revealed. It’s so uncomfortable that we have to call it Good. If we didn’t call it “Good” Friday it might just be me and Joan here today!

Thankfully, here we all are together. Each of us willing to face the fact that nothing is really finished. Each of us willing to open our hearts, at least a little, to the sadness, anger and confusion that comes from the incomplete resolution of Jesus’ death on the Cross. And your willingness, our willingness, to engage for awhile the pain of God’s unfinished work brings God great joy and comfort.

And you know, that’s what today is really about. It’s about finding the willingness to open our hearts to the unfinished nature of God’s creation, the incomplete redemption that still our world still longs for. Today is about being willing to acknowledge that things are not how God wants to them to be, and to reflect on the sadness and anger that situation stirs up in our hearts. If we can find the willingness, at least one day a year, to really engage the uneasiness that surrounds our brother Jesus’ violent death…can we also find the willingness to engage the uneasiness that surrounds the countless violent deaths of our brothers and sisters that occur in our communities and in our world every day?

Because it isn’t just the violence of the Cross that triggers our avoidance mechanisms. Many of us avoid the realities of violence that are a real part of life in our communities today. We shy away from going to violent places. We assign to others the responsibility of standing up for innocent victims of violence. We draw artificial lines in our hearts that separate us from our empathy with victims. We’re not like them because… It won’t happen here because… I’d never do that because…

I do it, too. It’s a strategy for coping with the sadness and anger and confusion that our violent world offers. It’s a way of trying to bring order to a chaotic world, but it often perpetuates cycles of violence, exploitation, innocent suffering and avoidance of responsibility. Jesus spent his entire life on this earth trying to call attention to those cycles. In his death, he invites us to identify first and foremost with innocent victims of violence in our world. The faithful response to the Cross is not to feel guilty, it is to feel sad and angry and confused. It is to be willing not to separate ourselves from the innocent victims of our time, but to empathize with them and to allow their suffering to touch our hearts and transform our lives.

Whether it is Jorge Fuentes, an Episcopal teenager shot and killed on the street in Boston last August. Or one of the children and teachers who were murdered in Newtown, CT in December. Or Gabrielle Giffords who was shot while was carrying out her civic duties. Or a movie goer in Aurora, Colorado who died at the hands of a psychiatrically disturbed man and his arsenal. Or one of the 42 American men who will kill himself with a gun today….when we turn off the radio or turn to the sports pages or turn to our spouse and say, “thank God that kind of thing doesn’t happen here,” we are turning away from the Cross, and closing a part of our hearts that Jesus tried so hard to pry open.

Today is the day we acknowledge that nothing is finished – either in heaven or on earth. This is the day we face the fact that it makes us too sad and too angry and too confused to live in a world where this kind of violence continues. And God too. We have two choices. We can either chose to deny this violence, to convince ourselves that it’s not really that bad, or that our faith or our goodness or our zip code will isolate us from it. Or we can accept the responsibility to live with the sadness and anger and confusion that innocent suffering causes. To live with it in our hearts and souls, until the day when, with our prayers, and our vision, and our effort and our courage to make change in this world, God’s work of redemption on the Cross will finally be complete. Amen.