

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Lent 4 midweek
March 29, 2017
John 19:28-29

The Suffering Word

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. (John 19:28–29 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

The fifth word from the cross is a word of suffering: "I thirst." This is genuine, human pain, the parched lips of our humanity made dry by the arid desert of our sin. Though He is the Son of God, Jesus had no exemption from suffering. On the contrary, His pain is all our pain combined. "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). He is the Sufferer who embodies all suffering, bearing in His own wounded flesh the suffering and sickness of a humanity fallen into decay and death.

He thirsts. And how bitterly ironic this is! He refreshed a wedding run dry at Cana with 180 gallons of water turned into wine. He promised living water to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, water of which one may drink and never again be thirsty. "The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). He declared at the Feast of Tabernacles as they were sprinkling the altar with water, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' " (John 7:37–38).

He who is the Fountain and Source of living water is thirsty. His strength is dried up like a potsherd; His tongue cleaves to the roof of His mouth; He is laid in the dry dust of death (cf. Psalm 22). He thirsts for us, and His thirst becomes our refreshment. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Jesus said, "for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). His thirst is our satisfaction; His pain quenches our lips too parched to praise, our throats too dry to confess. There is living water that flows out of the dryness of His thirst, a stream of living water released from His side, water that pours out into the wilderness bringing resurrection and life to Israel's dry and dusty bones. But for Jesus, in His hour of suffering in the darkness—stricken, smitten, and afflicted—there is only thirst.

He healed the sick. He alleviated pain and suffering. He looked with compassion and mercy on the sufferer—the leper, the woman with a hemorrhage, Peter's mother-in-law with a fever, the demonized and tormented soul—He looked on them all with compassion, seeing in their suffering the ravages of our sin and the signs of our death. The lips that once spoke blessing and peace are now chapped and broken. The tongue that once proclaimed the kingdom of God is

now thick with dryness. The throat that shouted the good news that God's reign had come with His coming is now as dry as the devil's wind. All of that suffering He healed, He now bears in His own body.

He cries out in need. "I thirst." The One who is Lord of all, Creator of all, the One who brought forth sea and dry land, cries out into the darkness in helpless despair. Will anyone hear Him? Will anyone attend to Him in His time of agony? His only physicians are the cynical soldiers standing nearby with a jug of cheap wine that had already gone sour, unfit to grace any proper table.

At first glance this seems to be a cold and callous act, but look again. This was all the soldiers had. They could have simply stood there and callously watched, without lifting a finger to help. Instead, they shared what they had with Jesus. Perhaps they sensed something of their own solidarity. They were losers as Roman soldiers go, or they wouldn't have been on crucifixion duty in this God-forsaken place. Jesus was a loser, too, by all appearances, a failed messiah who was now facing His tortured death. Perhaps there was an ounce of compassion in the hearts of these hardened soldiers. "Give the poor man a drink before He dies; it's the least we can do." So they hoist up some of their wine on a sponge and put it to His dry, dying lips.

"I tell you," Jesus said in the Upper Room on the night of His betrayal, "I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). The fruit of the vine again touches His lips, sour wine, yes, but fruit of the vine nonetheless. The kingdom of God is come. The reign of God is established in Jesus' death. He drinks one last toast in this old creation before dying.

He drinks that bitter cup so that we might drink of His sweet, new wine. "Take, drink, this is My blood of the covenant." He gives His sacred blood for wine, a foretaste of that great feast to come when wine will flow in unending joy in the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom that has no end. He drinks of the stinging cup of our human woe, of our suffering and misery, so that we might be refreshed and renewed by His cup.

Remember Him in His thirst when you're in pain, when the most the world can offer you is a drink of sour wine, when your suffering seems unquenchable. Remember Jesus in His thirst, thirsting for your salvation, and know this: You're never alone in your time of need and your time of suffering. The Suffering Servant is ever there with you, even though you may not detect it by your senses or even your reason. Yet He is there with you according to His promise.

Think of Him in your time of spiritual thirst, when your prayers and devotions are dried up like a potsherd, and your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth, silencing your hymns of praise. Come to Him, to the Fount of living water that flowed from His pierced side to the font of your Baptism, to the chalice of His Supper where He refreshes you with His body and blood. Do not let anything get between you and His cup, for He will quench your thirst as no one else can.

Remember also those Roman soldiers who tended to Jesus' dying request. "I was thirsty and you gave Me drink" (Matthew 25:35). He is in the one who thirsts, who cries out for a cup of cool water in the heat of the day. He is in the poor man who has no food or drink to sustain him. Jesus is there, hidden in the least, for you to serve as you have been served by Him. "As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40). You never know when and where the voice of the Suffering Servant will call out to you, "I thirst." And when you hear it, stand ready to give Him a cup of refreshment, for Jesus gives you to drink of His salvation.

Let us pray: For Your thirst and agony, for Your cry in time of need, for Your drinking the sour wine of our disobedience to its dregs that we might seek and find refreshment for our souls in You, all thanks and praise to You, most holy Jesus. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

(From Words of Life from the Cross, CPH, 2010)

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