

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

-- Luke 23:46-49

If there is anything that the COVID-19 Virus has imparted to me over the past few months, it's the indelible truth that our lives are definitely not and never have been our own: Death is the ultimate rip-off, the ultimate reminder that our vaunted boasts about self-possession are delusions. In one of his parables, Jesus compared God to a thief who comes in the night, while we are asleep and think we are secure, and steals everything we've got. It's not the nicest image of God, to be sure, but a truthful one. In the end, God (if God so chooses) is capable of ripping off everything that we think we have. In the end, the One who so graciously gave life is also the one who so unexpectedly has power and authority to take it. Nobody has a right to take anything from anyone else without permission unless he owns what he takes in the first place.

The Church, at its best, has always known this to be true. Church is where we go to be reminded that the life we live is not our own. We sing songs like, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.” In other words, we admit that God doesn't accept the lives we choose to give as much as God takes it, since it is God's to begin with.

It's like the prophets say, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. Now, with this final word from the cross, Christ commends his life – and his death – to God.

I don't know about you, but I've pondered with a lot of people concerning the question, “What will I do with my life?” Now, with these crucial moments on the cross, Jesus has me wondering, “What will I do with my death?” Most people I know hope to die in such a way that they will not know that they are actually dying. These days, people hope to die in such a way that we will go quickly, painlessly and thoughtlessly (not knowing) this is it. Finis.

Yet, there was a time when people prayed that they would die with enough time to make peace with God and with the people whom they had wronged. There was a day when people prayed that they would be given precious time at the end of their lives to call in their progeny and give them their last words of wisdom. But, if we were to tell our loved ones what we have learned from our life experience now, what on earth would we say? “Buy low, sell high?”

Jesus used his last moments to speak to God, to a thief, to his family, his followers, and now, at the very end, again to his Father. “Into your hands I commend my spirit.”

This “leaning into one's own death” reminds me of what many pastors and chaplains have often termed a “Happy Death,” describing Christians, being so perfected in love, so close to God that they slip into death with a joy that comes from a very short journey from life through death, to God. I sometimes fear that such “Happy Deaths” are far fewer these days when the self-absorption of our present lives makes for a long and arduous trip to an anguished, reluctant loss of self in the life to come.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not have a long way to go toward the Father, since He and the Father are One. In commending his life to the Father, Jesus' last word is a take-charge, confident word. At the end of hours of brutality and humiliation he assumes command in unity with God. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus will not let his crucifiers have the last word or determine the significance of the cross. What he teaches us in this last word is,

There is a way to accomplish a peaceful end to life.

In one last, instructive word, Jesus teaches us: No one took my life. I gave my life. I committed my life to my Father.

The next move is up to God. The last move, as it always is, is God's. The story begs for a conclusion that only the Father can give. So, in a way, we also are placing our fates into the hands of the Father, counting on the Father to end the story that our sin and treachery can never bring to a satisfying end.

How long will we have to wait for the Father to end the story in the Father's own way?

At least three days (Friday, Saturday, Sunday).

But for now, on this day, we've heard Jesus' last word. Pray to God that you might have the grace, and the faith also, to make it your last word, your final prayer, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Peace,
Pastor Steve