

“I Thirst.”

John 19:28-29

When so many people might put religion in the category of ordering one's thoughts and attitudes toward the world; that faith is about tenacity or bringing emotions like fear, anger, worry and grief under the control of single-minded belief and spiritual conviction, we are reminded of what perishable stuff we are made of when a microscopic invader brings us (literally) to our knees.

So far, Jesus has shown us how to forgive from the cross, how to be in solidarity with others from the cross, how to be a “family” formed by the cross and how to trust God even at the expense of one's own life.

Now, as Jesus suffocates and bleeds to death, things get physical to the point of choking on his fifth word: “I thirst.” The spirit is willing but the body is weak. It gives out. It betrays us in spite of all of our good intentions.

Against all of our tendencies to elevate spiritual endeavors above physical ones, we are reminded that Jesus was in the flesh. His suffering was real. In the same way, Christians aren't identified by shedding the physical in order to make room for putting on more and more spirituality. We're into the physical. Can you say incarnation? The Christian faith has got its hands full teaching people like us that, if we are going to meet God, we will meet God in the flesh.

Something to keep in mind, however, is that this moment is not anything like meeting “God-in-the-flesh of a newborn lying in a manger. This word comes from a place of violent, explicit bloodletting – BUT without any gory details. We don't need Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* to describe the suffering of each moment any more than we need physiological details of the death of a victim of COVID-19. There is plenty of room for our imagination. Jesus' suffering needs no more description now but a simple, “I thirst.”

It may sound like Jesus' strength is all but giving out. Yet, this is perhaps the high point of everything else that he has said so far. Perhaps, “I thirst,” is the declaration that Jesus really wants everyone to hear and he musters up every ounce of human and divine strength to say it. In the Scripture, to thirst is usually about more than water. To thirst is to yearn, to long for, to be desperate with desire. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus blessed a certain sort of holy desperation. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). The psalmist prays, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:2).

As we have moved into the season of Lent with instruction to practice social distancing, the Church has been deeply troubled by its inability to physically share the sacraments. Theologians and parishioners questioned and debated the merits of “virtual communion” as a result of our changed world. As a result, we are quickly learning the meaning of being thirsty. Can one share something that is, by nature, very physical by a very spiritual means?

The best counsel of our church is to use the disciplines of Lent and the events that have permeated our thoughts and spirits and physical energies these days, to consider that for which we thirst deeply.

Even so, maybe Jesus isn't demanding our thirst and our hunger to be intensified. He says, “I” thirst, not you, not me.

Maybe, for righteousness' sake, he was thirsty for us. Isn't that a fair summary of Scripture – God has a thing for us?

Sorry, if you thought when we say “God” we mean some impersonal power administering natural law from a distance. Our God is intensely personal. This God thirsts for us, unabashedly gives God's self over to us. God can't get closer to the real us than by way of a cross.

On the cross, God stoops to discover the real us. Here, he asks all of his disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” Here God learns the obvious answer, “No!” Any God who thirsts to pursue us, had better not be too put off by pain. Any God who tries to love us had better be ready to die for it.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Any [one] who preaches real love is bound to beget hate..... Real love has always ended in bloodshed.”

You can see where so reckless a move ends: on a cross.

I can't imagine any other way for us to get to God. We need a fanatic like Jesus to meet our own cruel fanaticism when our security is threatened. We have this history of murdering our saviors. God is in this fix, on Good Friday, because God is so thirsty for us.

Peace, Pastor Steve