

**Series: Prayers from the Cross**

**Today: Father, Into Thy Hands I Commend My Spirit**

**Text: Luke 23:44-49**

**An Easter Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, April 4, 2010**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

If you are visiting with us this morning, we want you to know that we have been looking forward to your being with us. We have sent many of our members to visit their families out of town, so if you are visiting someone you love who lives here, thanks for making the effort and helping us to fill the seats vacated by our own members. Easter is also a time when some people come to church that haven't attended at any other time during the year, and we want to extend a special welcome to you, as well. In fact we have been looking forward to your visit. If there is one Sunday in the year you might attend, this is the one we hope you might choose because it is the Sunday when the Christian faith sets itself apart from all of the other religions in the world. Today we celebrate the power of God which is more powerful than death and which meets us right here and right now in our living. So welcome to all. We are glad you chose First Presbyterian Church as your worship home for Easter Sunday morning.

I have been reminding my barber, Jack Segro, that it is a 14-year tradition for me to share one of his jokes with my congregation. I also reminded him that a few years ago I took some heat for the one he sent me that was just enough off color to offend some in the congregation; so whatever he sent had to be something I could tell in church. Earlier this week I got an email from him entitled: "*Jokes You Can Tell in Church.*" So here we go; two short ones.

After attending church on Easter, a young boy announced to his mother that he had decided to be a minister when he grew up. His mother told him that was a noble calling, but she wondered what made him decide on the ministry, and the little boy said, "*Well, I have to go to*

*church anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell instead of just sitting and listening.”*

This one hits home as our grandchildren are visiting us this weekend for the first time in six weeks, and yesterday my granddaughter came over to me and said, “Dad-dad, what happened to all the black hair you used to have?”

The story is of a little girl who was sitting on her grandfather’s lap as he read her a bedtime story, and from time to time she would take her eyes off the book and reach up and touch his wrinkled cheek. She would touch his cheek and then touch her own and then touch his again. Finally she spoke up and ask, “*Grandpa, did God make you?*” And the grandfather replied, “*Yes, sweetheart, God made me a long time ago.*” And the little girl said, “*Did God make me, too?*” To which her grandfather replied, “*Yes, indeed. God made you just a little while ago.*”

She reached up and felt his cheek again, and then she touched her own and said, “*God’s getting better at it, isn’t he?*”

O.K., then. I’ll tell him they worked.

For the last six weeks we have been focusing on the final hours in the life of Jesus. Specifically, we have focused on the prayers Jesus prayed from the cross. We have seen him forgive those who were carrying out his execution. We have heard him promise paradise to a criminal who was crucified with him. We have seen him as he cared for his mother; giving her care to one of his disciples. We have witnessed his humanity in acknowledging his feelings of abandonment and crying out in thirst. We have heard him cry out that the work he came to do was finished. Today we hear his final prayer: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*” In these final words from the cross I would like us to focus on three things: 1) His relationship with

God; 2) His ability to trust God with the outcome; and 3) Our need to embrace his sacrifice if we are to experience the mystery of the resurrection.

### **Relationship with God**

The first thing we notice in this prayer is its address. It is familiar. It is not addressed to the all powerful, almighty, everlasting God. It is much more intimate. It is that of a child speaking to a parent. He addresses his prayer: *Father*.

We have seen Jesus use the Psalms from the cross before, and he does it again here. The verse he quotes is Psalm 31:5: *Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me O Lord, faithful God*. However, he personalizes the address to God as a parent.

Psalm 31:5 was the verse that Jewish parents taught their children to pray at the end of every day. Jesus would have learned the prayer from Joseph, his father, and Mary, his mother. It is equivalent to the prayer many parents teach their children when they are putting them to bed at night: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take*. So it is not the prayer that is new. It is the relationship in which the prayer is prayed. Even in death Jesus trusts God as a loving parent.

When I was in college, my pastor gave me a small book by Catherine Marshall who was a personal friend of his. I don't remember the name of the book, but I do remember a story from it that has stayed with me all throughout my ministry. It was a fictional story of a 12-year-old boy named Kenneth. In the story Kenneth is suffering from an incurable illness. As he grows weaker and weaker, he begins to worry about what death will be like. At one point in the story, he turns to his mother and asks, "Mom, what is it like to die? Does it hurt?"

Caught off guard by the question, his mother is overcome with emotion. To gain composure, she dismisses herself to another room and then returns with an answer: "Kenneth, do

you remember when you were younger—when you used to play so hard, you would be too tired to undress yourself, but just fell asleep in my bed? Then, in the morning, you would awake to find yourself in your own bed in your own room? Your father had come with his strong arms and carried you there. Death is like that. You will wake up to find yourself in your own room where you belong, because Jesus cared and carried you with his strong arms."

This is the image we have of the relationship that Jesus had with God as he trusts his death into the hands of God.

### **Ability to Trust God with the Outcome**

The second thing to notice in this prayer is the ability of Jesus to trust God with the outcome. At that moment all Jesus knew was that he was going to die. Some might argue that if we believe Jesus was God, he would have known what lie ahead. However, we have seen over and over again what we call the mystery of the incarnation in these hours he spent on the cross.

We affirm that Jesus was God, but God who accepted the limitations of being human. Part of being human is that we cannot know the future. We can only live in the present, and the other part of being human is that we have to live with ambiguity. We don't know everything, and there are times when we must do the best we can and simply must trust God with the outcome. When our backs are up against the wall and we don't see any way out of the predicament in which we find ourselves, we must do as Jesus did. We must trust God, as hard as that may be.

There is a prayer which is attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebhur which is often heard at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous in this church. You probably have heard it. You may even have it memorized. It goes like this: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* In 1953 a

man by the name of William Spence, a member of AA, added a section. It is not a part of official AA literature, but it reflects what those in recovery have learned:

God,  
Grant me the serenity;  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
The courage, to change the things I can;  
And the wisdom, to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
And supremely happy with Him  
Forever and ever in the next.

### **Embracing the Sacrifice**

There is one final piece in our text for this morning that I would like you to see before we close. In verse 48 it says, *“And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.”*

It was Friday, and it would not be until Sunday morning that these people would hear the good news we proclaim this Easter; that the power of God is stronger than the worst that one human being can do to another; that the death of Jesus did not have the final word. Yet while all the others went away, they stayed to the bitter end. They entered into the suffering of Jesus, and because they did not run away, they were the ones who were the first to experience the good news of Easter; He is risen, indeed!

There is something for us to learn here. We in America don't like unhappy endings. We don't like ambiguity. However, it is only as we are willing to embrace the suffering of Jesus as well as the suffering in our own lives, or the lives of our family and friends, that we are prepared to receive the word of hope that comes with Easter.

There are no easy answers to the complex questions which life brings. Faith is not an antidote to suffering. Faith is what allows us to enter into the suffering of this world and not run away from it. Faith believes that even though sorrow may linger for the moment, joy will eventually come, if we don't run away.

The other evening at our Stephen Ministers meeting, Candee Buckbee shared a piece with us written by Bob Perks, a motivational speaker and writer who lives here in Pennsylvania [Source: beliefnet.com]. Listen to what he writes:

*It seems lately that more and more of my friends are facing some seemingly insurmountable challenges in their lives. A few have lost their jobs and some have failed marriages. All too many have health issues or are battling cancer.*

*I don't know if it is desperation that causes them to turn to me for advice or whether they have come to value our friendship when all they feel is hopeless. They expect answers or some magic waving of a wand to make things better.*

*I have often struggled with what to say. Mostly because I have faced many of the same challenges in my own life, I remember how empty I felt after someone cheerfully offered words like, "Keep your chin up!" "Things will get better!" "Hang in there!" "It's always darkest...", etc. Yes, even those who were quick to quote the Bible to me found me quite unreceptive at the time.*

*So what do I say? "What can I do, Bob? I've lost my job. What do you suggest?" "Begin again." "He walked out on me. My whole world just ended. What should I do?" "Begin again."*

*"Bob, I know both your son and your wife had cancer. I found out my wife does, too. What did you tell them?" "Begin again."*

*It almost sounds too simple. I imagine in the darkest hours of one's life, those words would seem useless or uncaring. But it is indeed the answer. All life challenges bring about an ending--and the chance for a beginning. A job loss presents an opportunity to start over somewhere else and maybe even in another career. A failed marriage does not mean you are through loving or being loved. It means there are others just like you needing to be loved. Find them. A life-threatening disease does not mean giving up. It means starting a new path to recovery and discovering within you the ability to fight back and win. And if you are a person of faith, even death does not mean it's over. It means "to begin again."*

### **Conclusion**

My friends, this is what we celebrate on Easter. We celebrate a relationship with God that allows us to trust God with the outcome when all we want to do is remain in control. And perhaps most important, we believe that the power of God is stronger than the power of death in this world, and that when we place our faith and trust in the same power of God which raised Jesus from the dead, we can begin again. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.