

**Series: Prayers from the Cross**

**Today: It is Finished!**

**Text: John 19:29-30**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, March 28, 2010 (Palm Sunday)  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Twenty nine years ago I ran in and completed my first marathon: 26.2 miles. I lived in Portland, Oregon at the time, and my best friend, Rocky Johnson, whom I had introduced to running, challenged me to join him in training for and completing this major test of the body and the will. We had run in several shorter races together (10 kilometers—6.2 miles), but a marathon was more than four times that distance.

Runners know that you just don't decide to run a marathon one day and then run it the next day, or the next week, or even the next month. It requires months of training in order to build your endurance in order to go that far. You start out running 5 to 6 miles every day for several weeks, and then you begin to lengthen three of those runs to 8 miles, then 12 miles, and once a week you do a long run of 19 to 20 miles. However, you never run the last 6.2 miles. Those are always uncharted territory no matter how hard you may have trained.

Rocky and I had a whole group of people pulling for us and praying for us that we might meet our goal of completing the Portland Marathon in less than four hours. Several of them joined us in our training regimen, but we were the only two who were committed to run the entire marathon.

One of our friends, Dr. Jim Eastman, met us at mile 20 to join us for the last six miles to distract us from the exhaustion and talk us in. I have picture in my office at home which shows me raising my arms and shouting to Jim, "*I'm going to finish this thing, Jim! I'm going to finish!*" And I did; in 3 hours and 38 minutes. It is one of those moments I shall never forget.

Have you ever worked on something for a long, long time and wondered if you would ever be done? Do you remember how good it felt to complete the assignment or the task you set out to accomplish?

Today our prayer of Jesus from the cross on which he is hanging is just three words: *It is finished!* In the language of the Bible it is actually only one word: *telestai*. His arms were raised over his head, too, but not as sign of victory. They were nailed there to the cross, and from the depth of his being he shouts:

***TELESTAI! FINISHED!***

When Jesus shouts this word from the cross, it is the word of triumph, not a word of tragedy. It is the culmination of what his life on this earth was intended to accomplish. He has reached his goal. His work is done. *It is finished!*

Classically trained Presbyterian preachers are trained to think in terms of three points when we write sermons, and this morning I would like to suggest that each of these words from the cross is packed with meaning. Will you consider with me: 1) The IT; 2) The IS; and 3) The FINISHED?

### **The IT**

What did Jesus mean when he said IT is finished? What is the *IT* to which he is referring? *IT* is the work he came to do.

Christians view the world through a lens which helps us to make sense of the activity of God, and that lens is the Bible. The Bible teaches us that the first man and the first woman were created in the image of God and after likeness of God and placed in an idyllic setting where they had all they needed. They didn't have to worry about a thing. In order to stay in this state for the rest of their lives, they had to obey only one rule. They were not to eat from the tree which would

make them the masters of their own destiny. They were to stay away from the tree which would give them knowledge of good and evil. They were to place all their faith and trust in God, and God would guide them in the path they should follow.

Well, you know the story. No sooner did God say, "*You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.*" And what did they do? They ate, and they paid the consequences for their disobedience. They were banished from the garden.

However, the story which we tell ourselves does not end there. God created human beings to be in a relationship with God, and by their own disobedience, human beings broke that relationship. The rest of the Old Testament is about God trying to provide a way to heal their disobedience.

- God sends a flood so that he might start over through one man and his family and two of every kind of creature. However, human beings took put their own welfare before their relationship with God, and that didn't work.
- God gives a promise to Abraham that through him and his family all people will be blessed, and that didn't work.
- God gives people a set of laws that if they are followed will keep them in the relationship he longs to establish with them, but human beings break the Law.
- God sends leaders to guide the people, but the people do not listen because they are too busy squabbling amongst themselves.
- God gives them a king to centralize power, but it only leads to the abuses of power.
- God gives them prophets to warn the people about their abuses, and they kill the prophets.
- Finally God decides to settle things once and for all. God comes in a form we can understand; in the body of a human being; and when he suffers and dies, he takes into his own body everything that keeps human beings separate from God, and he takes it with him to the grave.

The work Jesus came to do is complete. IT is finished. Everything is now in the hands of the One who sent him! The stage is set for what we will celebrate next week that not even the worst that one human being can do to another is enough to keep God's love in a tomb! IT is finished!

### **The IS**

Now we need to note the tense of this prayer. Jesus did not say "*It was finished.*" Nor did he say, "*It will be finished.*" He said, "*It IS finished.*" The work he came to do is accomplished. The broken relationship is reestablished in this act of sacrificial death once and for all! It is not something that we wait for. It is something we are to embrace right here; right now. Faith is not something we do so that we will have a relationship with God when we leave this life. Faith is something we do now!

A colleague tells a story of a moment in his marriage where he was not very proud. He and his wife were having an argument, and in his fury, he yelled at her and aimed my fist at a section of the dining room wall. This was not the first time he had lost his temper and put his fist through the wall, but it was the first he hit a stud right on and broke a knuckle. A deathly silence settled in the room.

My colleague came from a family in which nothing got done until someone yelled. His wife came from a family in which yelling brought things to a standstill. As he writhed in physical pain, he also writhed in emotional pain. He felt he was a moral failure of a husband.

Awkwardly he tried, with one hand, to sweep up the bits of sheetrock strewn on the floor. Then he felt a hand on his arm. He turned around, and it was his wife. She said something apologetic. He said something apologetic. And then she embraced him for a long time.

My colleague writes, *“She had every right to pronounce a grand moral imperative, condemn my behavior, and distance herself from me. That surely would have taught me a lesson. Instead, she embraced the angry sinner, and rather than teaching me a lesson, she helped heal me.”* [Source: Mark Galli, *"The Good Friday Life," Christianity Today (4-4-07)*]

This is what happened on the cross. This is the IS of forgiveness. It is not located sometime in the past nor is it sometime in the future. It is right here and it is right now!

### **The FINISHED**

Finally, we need to focus on the last word: Finished. The work Jesus came to do is done. Nothing more can be added to it, nor can anything be taken from it. It is done; complete; finished.

At our Early Word Bible Study this week, we asked the question how the crucifixion fits into our understanding of the will of God, and my colleague, Jack Houdeshel, reminded us of the book by Leslie Weatherhead entitled The Will of God. In it Weatherhead speaks of three expressions of the will of God; Intentional, Circumstantial, and Ultimate. The intentional will of God is shown us in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The circumstantial will of God is shown to us in the unnecessary death of a good man for a purpose. The ultimate will of God is shown by way in which God used the cross to take the sin of the world deal with it in the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Max Lucado tells of an overdraft notice he received on the checking account of one of his daughters. He says that he encourages his college-age girls to monitor their accounts. Even so, they sometimes overspend. Now he is faced with a dilemma. This is what he writes:

*What should I do? Send her an angry letter? Admonition might help her later, but it won't satisfy the bank. Phone and tell her to make a deposit? Might as well tell a fish to fly. I know her liquidity. Zero. Transfer the money from my account to hers? Seemed to be the best option. After all, I had \$25.37. I could replenish her account and pay the overdraft fee as well. Since she calls me Dad, I did what dads do. I covered my daughter's mistake.*

*When I told her she was overdrawn, she said she was sorry. Still, she offered no deposit. She was broke. She had one option, "Dad, could you..." "Honey," I interrupted, "I already have." I met her need before she knew she had one.*

*Long before we knew we needed grace, God did the same. He made an ample deposit. Before you knew you needed a Savior, you had one. And when you ask him for mercy, he answers, "Dear child. I've already given it." [Source: Max Lucado, Cure for the Common Life (Thomas Nelson, 2008) pp. 69-70]*

### **Conclusion**

TELESTAI! *It is finished!* Once and for all, it is done. This is the final leg of our Lenten journey as we make our way to the cross this week, and then next Sunday to the empty tomb.